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Keishi Ayasato

Illustration by
Saki Ukai

Torture Princess

◆ Fremd Torturchen ◆

VISIT...

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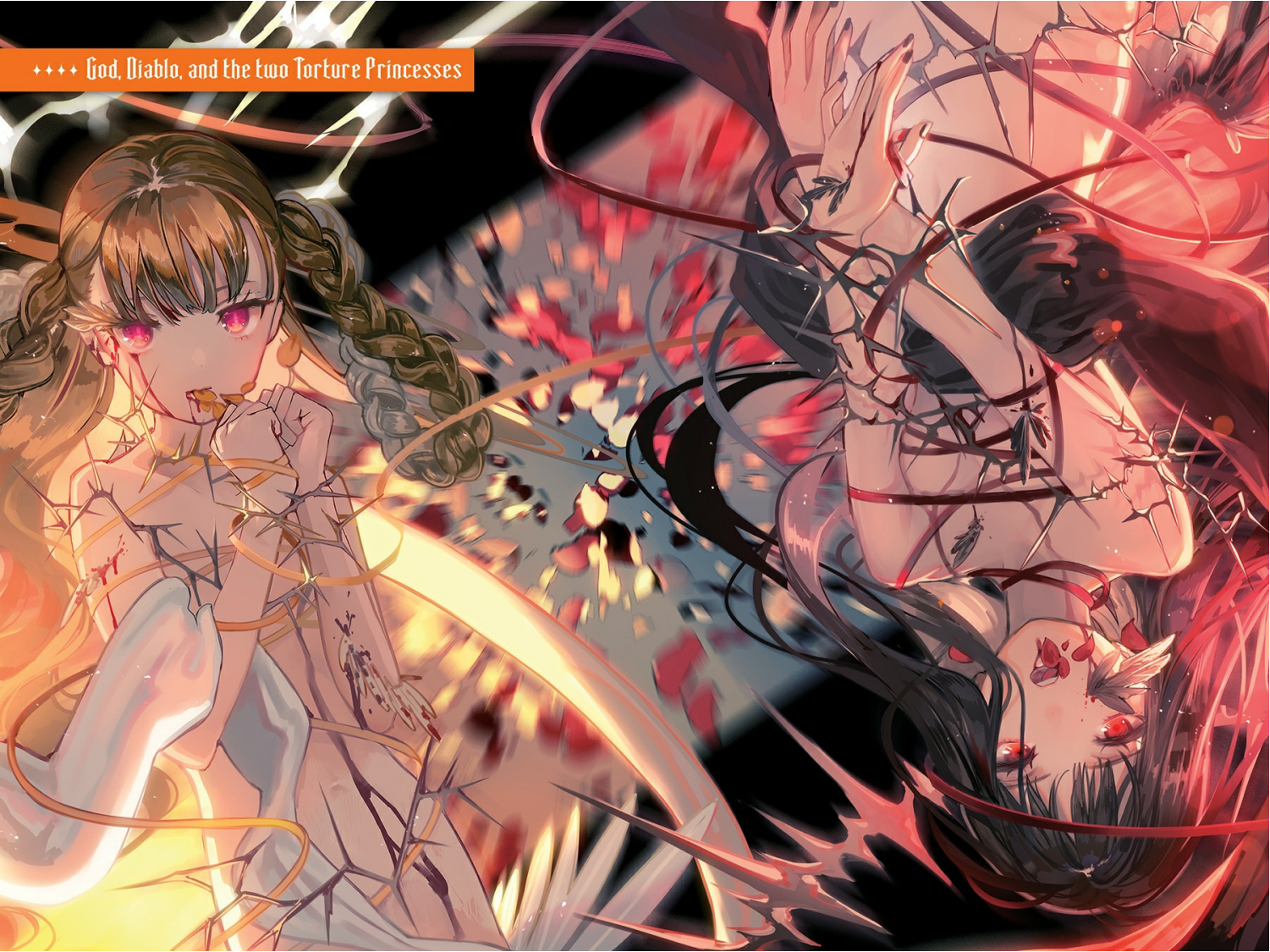
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++++ The Black Army



★★★★ Jeanne's Diary

Cloudy skies, Temperature below average; now is no time for battling against demons.

Whatever this is, I discovered it while searching the castle, so I have taken it upon myself to write its continuation. The world to come may find itself in need of the memories and events recorded within, after all. I also find it rather intriguing that the previous author seems to have been the Apostle.

The contents of that entry are hardly straightforward, but that's only to be expected.

The very fact that he wrote that not-straightforward report at all is highly interesting. Perhaps he has mixed feelings about all the things he betrayed. In a sense, though, many of those things have already been completely and utterly destroyed.

Currently, I am conducting a search of the Torture Princess's castle. I hope to find some hint or clue soon.

Just as the Apostle wrote in his last entry, whether or not the world will last another day is wholly unclear at this juncture.

Not that I agree that "at the very least, I hope that my acquaintances will be able to keep on smiling for as long as possible," mind you.

What is true is that something must be done about the current situation. That is my role, after all.

Through murder, we will bring about salvation. For that was the sole reason I was created.

Today's menu Is there really any meaning in having such a section?

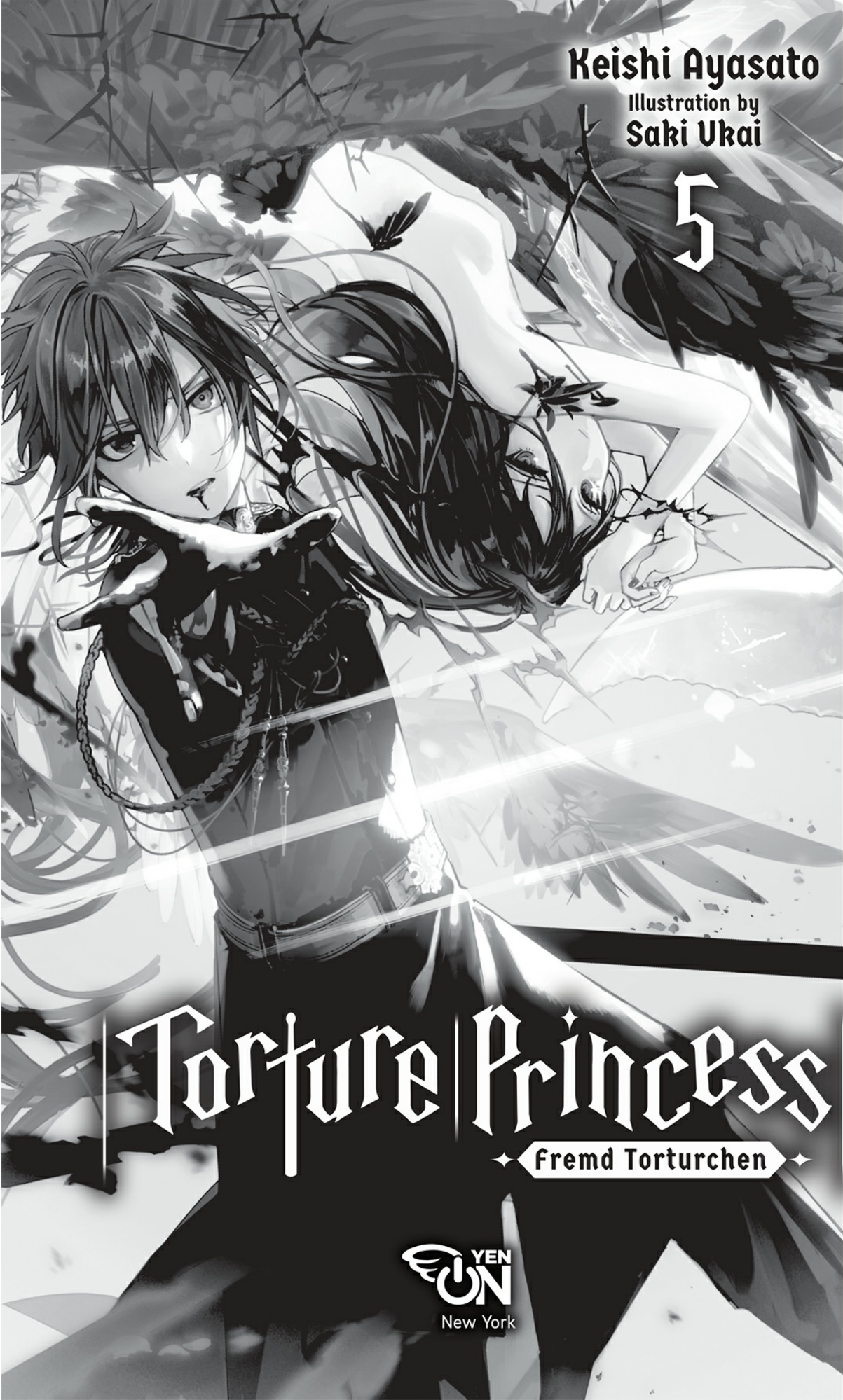
Madam Elisabeth's reaction I'm quite serious. Is there any point?

Today's Mr. Dim-Witted Servant And what in the world is wrong with this heading?

Today's Mr. Dim-Witted Servant 2 Truly, it is a great mystery.

Perhaps if my little lady was here, I could have asked her about the parts that make no sense.

A meaningless hypothetical, I suppose. I must return to my search.



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Torture Princess

◆ Fremd Torturchen ◆

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Translation by Nathaniel Hiroshi Thrasher Cover art by Saki Ukai

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Elisabeth Le Fanu The Torture Princess. A beautiful woman who massacred her people, her acts of torture even extending to the nobles. She is set to be executed. Had been ordered by the Church to punish those who contracted with demons and told "Before the day of your death, try to do some good at least." After the subjugation of the fourteen demons, she was given a new order: to kill Kaito for going against humanity.	Hina An automaton maid once built by Vlad. Kaito's eternal lover, companion, soldier, weapon, love toy, sex doll, and bride. After the subjugation of the fourteen demons, she opposed humanity alongside Kaito in order to stop Elisabeth's execution and is currently acting as his wife and spending her life on the run with him.	Izabella Vicker Current commander of the Holy Knights. Possesses powerful mana, a gallant spirit, and a deft sword arm. She lost her brother at the Plain of Skewers. Fought alongside Kaito and Elisabeth to drive back the Monarch, the Grand Monarch, and the King in the capital. While she puts her job first, she also holds some affection for Kaito and co.	The Kaiser With the advice and aid of the soul replica that Vlad left behind, Kaito summoned the strongest of the fourteen ranked demons once more. The Kaiser has taken an interest in Vlad and Kaito, calling the former "He Who Rears Hell Within His Mind" and the latter "Accumulation of Seventeen Years' Pain." Has a short temper and a great deal of pride.
Characters	Vlad Le Fanu The creator of the Torture Princess. Elisabeth's self-proclaimed father. Had formed a contract with the Kaiser, the strongest of the fourteen ranked demons, but was subjugated by Elisabeth. At present, a replica of his soul is assisting Kaito. Treats Kaito as his successor.	The Grave Keeper One of the Church's high priests and a fanatic who was in charge of guarding the royal underground graveyard. They were responsible for feeding demon meat to a divine creature and merging it with a human to create a gatekeeper, as well as building a room decorated with human suffering. They've spent many years concealing the presence of the Church's greatest secret: the First Demon.	Diablo An entity that exists to destroy the world, as it was created by God. While Diablo normally resides in a higher dimension and is unable to interfere with the world of man, numerous catastrophes were caused by the fourteen contractors. Is composed of fourteen ranked demons: the Knight, the Governor, the Grand Governor, the Earl, the Grand Earl, the Duke, the Grand Duke, the Marquis, the Grand Marquis, the Monarch, the Grand Monarch, the King, the Grand King, and the Kaiser. Their contractors obtain immense power but lose their human forms in exchange. They should have all been subjugated, but...?
Kaito Sena A young man, brutally killed after a life of abuse. He was summoned by Elisabeth and made to work as her servant. Due to his experiences in life, strong emotions such as fear, anger, and hatred cause him to become unusually calm. After the subjugation of the fourteen demons, he chose to become humanity's enemy as the Kaiser's new contractor in order to stop Elisabeth's execution.	The Butcher A demi-human with chicken-like feet. Wears a black cloak and carries around a blood-stained sack. Nobody has ever seen what's inside the sack. Can obtain any type of meat for you, no matter what it may be. Elisabeth often purchases organs from him. Has no interest in anything besides meat, and thinks about nothing else...or so he says.	Lute A wolf beastfolk. He's the commanding officer of the first squad of Vyade Ula Forstlast's private army, a woman who in turn is the second imperial princess of the Forest King, one of the forefathers of all beastfolk. Lute has a goatfolk wife and also once invited Kaito into the beastfolk lands.	Jeanne de Rais A young girl who calls herself the saint and the whore. Her true nature is that of a man-made Torture Princess created by the alchemists. She ordered Kaito and Elisabeth to serve her in order to save the world, but...?

**A Tale
from Long,
Long Ago**

F r e m d T o r k u r c h e n

A Tale from Long, Long Ago

There was nothing there.

And yet, at the same time, there was everything.

If one was to describe that place, the most apropos comparison would be to a blank white canvas. Nothing meaningful was painted atop it. In other words, one could paint over it to their heart's content.

It was empty, and it was free. There was nothing there, yet there was everything.

To one with the privilege of wielding a brush, it was akin to an ideal, perfect paradise. After all, they could create Heaven there, one that aligned exactly with their desires. If they wanted to, they could even create Hell. But such freedoms weren't afforded to the one who bore the brush this time.

The reason for that lay in the fact that she was a peerless sinner. She bore grave crimes upon her back.

She had no choice but to bear responsibility for the scars she'd carved in the canvas's predecessor.

Because of that, she had to build the skies, build the earth, and birth the seas.

She had to make vegetation flourish across the land. She had to craft the moon and stars. She had to release fish and birds and beasts and livestock out into the world.

Then, after making humans, beastfolk, and demi-humans, she rested.

That was the fate she imposed upon herself. Fleeing her atonement would have been unforgivable.

She knew. She knew that in the world to come, all would revere her. Unlike the resentful voices of those on the verge of annihilation she'd once heard, she would doubtless be hailed as a "Saint" and be offered up countless

commendations. She would be the mother of all who existed, after all. She would probably even be prayed to, hailed as the “Suffering Saint” who sacrificed herself for her children. But for the rest of eternity, nobody would ever consider what she had truly felt.

Without trying to learn what she’d been like before she’d become the Saint and her tale became embellished, they would have no way of even doing so. But she had no intention of condemning them for that fact. That was simply the way the masses were. The same had been true in the world prior. They would hear only what they wanted to hear, see only what they wanted to see.

Flocks of sheep were, fundamentally, stupid. And that was the way things ought to be.

But at the end of the day, was that truly not a sin? The ignorant had no right to cast blame, did they? She remained unforgiven, yet forgiveness was precisely what they would receive. Therein lay an inescapable contradiction.

If that was the case, then, didn’t that make their entire way of life fundamentally wrong?

All alone, she eventually became obsessed with that notion.

After troubling over that fact for quite some time, she created a certain something. It was wholly unlike the land and the sea and the plants and the moon and the stars, wholly unlike the fish and the birds and the beasts and the livestock, and wholly unlike the humans and the beastfolk and the demi-humans. She chose a demi-human as its base, but in order to grant it a long life, she mixed in so many other things that they became wholly unrecognizable.

And that was how she created her hideous, adorable attendant, one who would serve only her.

At present, she was standing before him, cradling a lump swaddled in red cloth in her arms.

She had yet to shed tears of blood, nor had she been hung upside down. She merely looked at the lump in her arms with an affectionate smile on her lips. The rebuilding was still in its initial stages then, and the world was a clean slate. Even the wind had yet to blow. But by some miracle, the lump peeked out from

behind the cloth. It lasted only a moment, but its reddish-black alien form was laid bare.

The thing she was cradling was a lump of demon flesh.

Stooping down, she presented the bundle to her attendant. Then she gently passed the seed of evil to him, as though she were entrusting him with her own child. And the attendant obediently took it.

He hugged the repulsive lump of meat tightly, like he was trying to protect it.

“What a good boy you are,” she whispered.

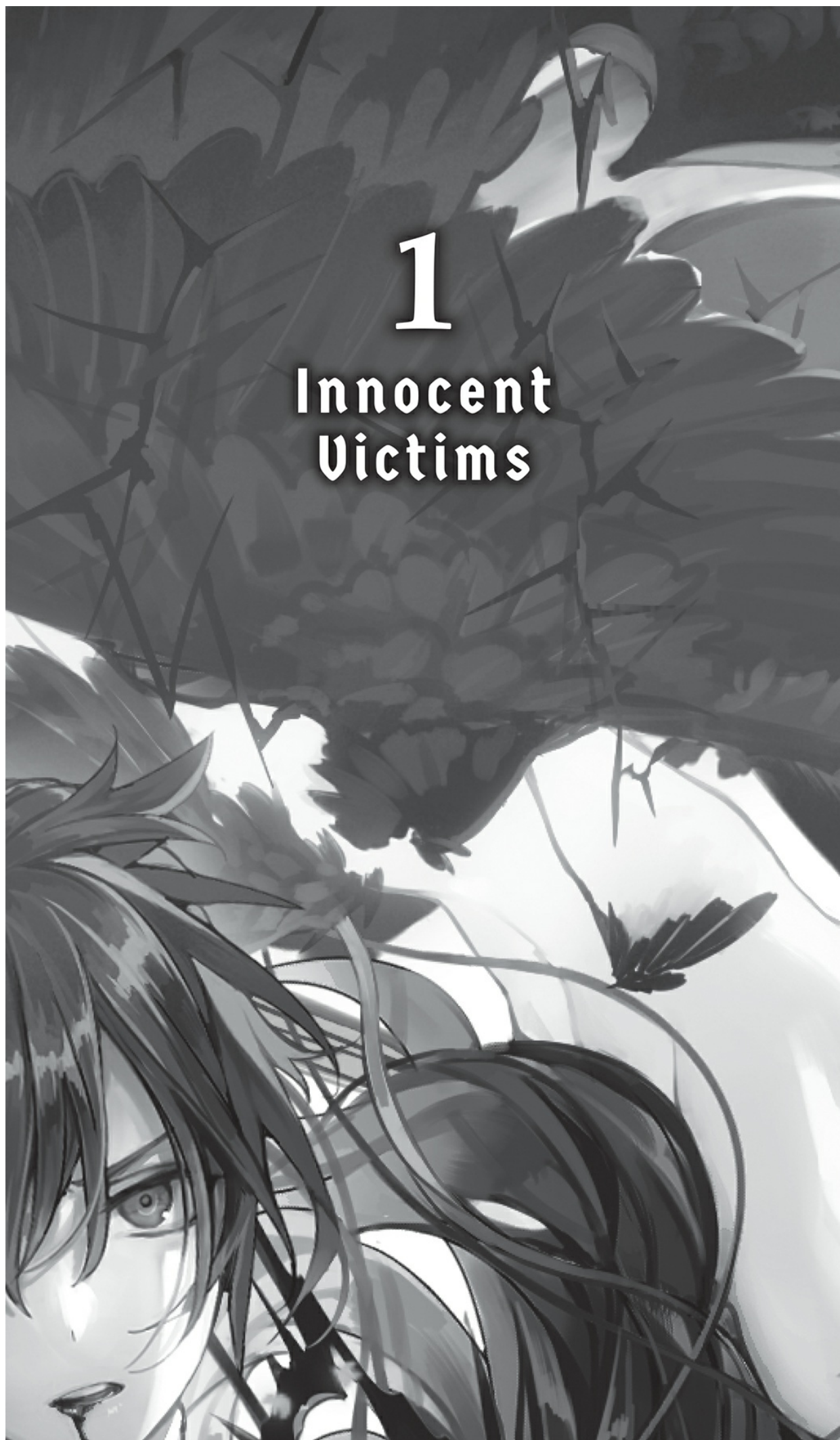
“What a good, good boy you are,” she praised him in her sweet, sweet, madness-tinged voice.

It was a story from long, long ago. A tale too horrible to be called Genesis, too tragic.

But it was also far too twisted to pass off as a fairy tale.

1

Innocent Victims



1

Innocent Victims

Thanks to the efforts of the Torture Princess and her servant, the fourteen demons were successfully defeated and slain.

Humanity's desperate fight had finally reached its conclusion. But the battle left the world acutely wounded, like a chessboard with cracks running down its surface.

The Capital, in particular, had been scarred and defiled. And that had brought forth a new problem.

The upper echelons of the Church, a number of their fanatics, and some of those who wished to escape the burden of having to restore the Capital sought to awaken the first demon, expand the destruction, and in doing so urge God to rebuild the world.

They believed that when the world was mended, the pious faithful would remain. But that line of thinking was naive in the extreme and shallower than the dreams of a child.

God created the world, and Diablo destroyed it. That was the extent of their existences.

Rebuilding was nothing more than the act of blotting out the current portrait, then painting a new one on top of it.

Other than the one holding the paintbrush, everyone would die. That was the answer awaiting them.

Also, in the underbelly of the world, there existed those who had worked to bring those events about, and there existed those who had worked to prevent it. The Butcher was the former, and he had sold Vlad demon flesh in order to bring calamity down on the world. The fourteen demons were destroyed, but the damage they left was more than sufficient to push people into desiring the

world's restructuring.

The flower of malice was blooming proud and vibrant.

The latter, those who worked to prevent it, were a group of alchemists, and they sacrificed their entire clan to bring forth a new Torture Princess. She was a maiden of salvation, a self-proclaimed oppressor of slaves, savior of the world, saint, and whore.

Jeanne de Rais.

On her guidance, Kaito and the others were currently deep in the sealed-away bowels of the Capital's underground tomb.

The room they were in was modeled after a nursery. At first glance, it looked to be cutely adorned. But the decorations' true nature was that of grotesque agony. Living human heads were embedded in the walls in place of a floral wallpaper, and intestines dangled from torn stomachs on the ceiling in place of ribbons.

And in the room's center sat a cradle. It seemed almost cruel how pure a shade of white it was.

The cradle was rocking, as though to soothe the first demon slumbering within.

As she stood before that overwhelmingly powerful, wicked entity, Jeanne made her haughty proclamation.

"Now, dear Lovers, you understand the truth, and the gravity of the situation. Kaito Sena. Elisabeth Le Fanu. I know that the two of you are destined to fight each other to the death. But now you must throw that all away and serve me as faithful slaves."

She turned her rosy gaze directly on the two of them.

And when she did, Jeanne de Rais, the artificial Torture Princess, went on as though it were only natural.

"At this rate, our world will be destroyed, and not so much as a trace will remain."

Her words rang out through the chamber like a final verdict.



“...Hmph.”

“...Hmm.”

Upon hearing what Jeanne had to say, both Kaito and Elisabeth abruptly crossed their arms. Then they closed their eyes, as if to scrutinize her order-like request. Elisabeth’s beautiful face hardened, her expression serious, and Kaito’s youthful face did the same. A few seconds passed. Then the two of them opened their eyes in unison.

Neither of them had consulted the other. Without exchanging so much as a glance, they gave their replies.

Not even a breath separated their overlapping refusals.

Jeanne blinked repeatedly. Her head slumped as it tilted to the side.

“You made your decisions rather promptly, didn’t you, Lovers? Moreover, your answers themselves were outside my expectations. And ‘surprising’ hardly begins to describe the speed with which you responded. Please state your reasons.”



“First, ’tis wholly unclear what actions you intend to take hereon in search of this salvation of yours or what have you.”

Elisabeth raised her forefinger.

The black varnish on her nail glittered as she spun it aimlessly around in the air.

“Even if you tell me to become your servant, I have no intention of agreeing while unable to verify the validity of your plans and directions. And even prior to that, another problem arises. Do I look to you to be a laudable enough woman to labor like a slave under the direction of another?”

“Yeah, nope, not seeing it.”

Elisabeth pointed at herself, her face fiendish and cruel. Behind her, Kaito nodded earnestly.

The two of them then traded an inane exchange. “I have no desire to hear that from you. I shall kill you for that later.” “Wait, why?!” Seeing them on their normal behavior despite the time and place, Jeanne tilted her head to the other side.

“I see. That seems logical enough. Even the last section felt oddly persuasive. And your other reasons?”

“Second, you clearly have intentions of dragging us into some battle for the sake of salvation, do you not? And with no regard for our thoughts on the matter, at that. Why, then, should we content ourselves with being your servants? I see little benefit. We have little proof that your true motives are worthy of such faith.”

“I see, I see. And what else?”

“Third, Kaito, you tell her.”

Elisabeth turned to Kaito and gave a sharp gesture with her chin. The two of them still hadn’t consulted with each other. But in spite of that, he took over her speech with utmost ease.

“Thing is, we just don’t like you that much. That’s all.”

“I see. Illogical in the extreme.”

Jeanne bobbed her head up and down. But that was the extent of her reaction. She didn't seem satisfied, but she didn't seem dejected, either. She simply began spinning around on the spot, her left foot acting as her axle.

The chains dangling from her thin wrists like a prisoner's jingled.

“Then I can assume that you have no intention of becoming my servants, but you plan on maintaining our collaborative relationship? **After tellin' you chucklefucks so many of the world's secrets, having to be enemies with you meatheads sounds like a bad time! As you can see, I'm just a sweet little girl, after all!**”

“The way you manage to offend is nothing short of superb, and your manner of speech is as disjointed as always. But I have no complaints with your conclusion. My servant's foolishness and goody-goody nature know no limits, so I'm all but certain he'd have gotten himself involved regardless, of course. But I am not he. Normally, I'd have lost interest altogether the moment you mentioned salvation.”

“Oh, do you intend on seceding, then? **I'd like to see you try, bitch!**”

“Nay, I shall lend you my strength. And rejoice, for I intend to give it my utmost.”

A cruel smile accompanied Elisabeth's declaration. Kaito nodded, his expression devoid of surprise. Even though she'd been the one to ask for help, though, Jeanne plopped her head to the other side again in puzzlement.

“For what reason?”

“I slew the fourteen demons. I put them down, each and every one. I destroyed them.”

Suddenly, Elisabeth's tone grew cold and levelheaded. Her crimson eyes narrowed.

Sharp bloodlust danced atop her tongue as the words slipped from her mouth.

“But for that to be the mere opening act to the world being rebuilt? What an

insipid farce. The ones who would laugh at the corpses I've left in my wake and accuse them of having died in vain shall perish by my hand. I shall kill them all. And in a manner befitting the name of Torture Princess, no less."

Elisabeth gave a grand laugh. Her smile was beautiful, twisted, and evil.

Seeming half-likely to lick her lips, she gave voice to her blasphemous proclamation.

"Even if they are the Saint, even if they are Diablo, and even if they are God."

"Bravo. I would expect no less from you. I would expect no less from the first Torture Princess, the woman who willingly gave herself to sin."

Jeanne loudly clapped, the chains on her wrists jingling like a tambourine. Then, placing an open palm over her chest, she gave an elegant bow. With a great display of pride, Jeanne endorsed Elisabeth's statement.

"Indeed, precisely. It would not do for us to be anything but haughty and proud. For without our human deeds surpassing those of God and Diablo, how could we possibly hope to bring about salvation?"

"Hmm," pondered Kaito. On a basic level, Jeanne displayed the same arrogant disposition no matter who she was dealing with. But with Elisabeth, her reactions seemed to be of a slightly more positive bent.

The plan to create a Torture Princess must have started way long ago. But back then, they probably hadn't arrived at the name "Torture Princess" yet. And it's probably not just her speech—she likely used Elisabeth as a point of reference for her actions, too.

Perhaps Jeanne held a degree of respect toward the woman she'd used as a template. Elisabeth, though, seemed like she couldn't care less about Jeanne's admiration. She gave a small shrug.

As she did, Izabella interrupted their conversation.

"I apologize for the intrusion, but isn't it rather dangerous to be making such an uproar down here? If you'll forgive me, you've all been rather loud the last few minutes... What do you intend to do if that thing wakes up?"

At the moment, Izabella was being carried by Deus Ex Machina, the living,

four-in-one weapon Jeanne had summoned as a servant. Sitting in its metal arms, she was looking at the cradle with a pallid expression on her face. Her eyes were filled with primal terror.

Kaito and Elisabeth turned their gazes toward the first demon as well. It was still deep in slumber.

But if it's asleep, that means it's eventually gonna wake up.

As a matter of fact, the group scheming to have the world rebuilt was actively hoping for that *thing* to awaken. But just as unease began welling up within Kaito, a voice suddenly called out from beside him to refute it.

"Put your mind at ease. You needn't worry about that, I daresay."

Kaito turned to look at the voice's owner. A man wearing an aristocratic coat with a cravat was floating beside him, his legs crossed elegantly in the air. The man was Vlad Le Fanu, the Kaiser's previous contractor and Elisabeth's foster father—or, to be more precise, a replica of his soul. The smile that spread across his face bordered on beautiful.

"After all, its contract with its master yet stands."

Vlad was a mere phantasm, and as such, the forces of gravity held no sway over him. He floated gently through the air on his way to his destination, which was, of all places, directly above Diablo's cradle. Izabella quietly called out, trying to get him to stop.

"Wait, stop, stop, that's dangerous. You shouldn't get any closer than that."

"Good heavens, to think that the Holy Knights' commander would be such a coward. Timidity and virginity go hand in hand, I suppose, which lends your reaction a certain charm to it."

"I'm gonna need you to dial it way back, man. That was a pretty blatant HR violation there."

"What exactly might an 'ay-char' be, my dear successor? I'm afraid that we of this world aren't familiar with that word."

Vlad calmly threw Kaito's cold rebuke aside. Then he turned back to the entity before himself and peered at it, an act that would have been enough to drive

any normal human mad. As he placed his hand on the side of the cradle, he let out a seductive whisper.

“Upon manifestation, higher-ranked demons use their summoners as references and obtain from them language and ego. And upon gaining ego, many, like our friendly Kaiser here, go against the wishes of their inexperienced masters. This thing’s summoner, though, was first-rate. The Church built it this devious little room, but even with the pacification from the room’s pain, it wouldn’t awaken. The order it received was so effective, it borders on a curse, you see.”

Kaito responded to Vlad’s words with shock. Then, still dumbfounded, he turned to survey the room.

The people embedded in the walls were screaming in agony. But their vocal cords had been taken from them, and their howls were silent. The only things coming from their faces were tears and saliva. And the people hanging from the ceiling with rent stomachs were the same. The entire room was perpetually filled with the pain of the living, designed to pacify the demon within.

But according to Vlad, all of it was meaningless.

“Wait, the Church went out of their way to build this torture chamber...and it turns out they didn’t even need to?”

“That they didn’t, my dear. Since time immemorial, it has been an occasional habit of the weak to fearfully give offerings to the strong despite neither party wishing it. It’s a tragic tale, truly, and I’m sure the unfortunate victims around us find it more appalling than any.”

Vlad chuckled, and Kaito clenched his fists. As they did, Diablo continued peacefully breathing. It looked like a satisfied child, one who had never so much as experienced sorrow.

Vlad drew his face close to the child’s, which was repulsive in a difficult-to-quantify way. This time, his laugh was tinged with irony.

“Heh, no matter how proficient its master’s order, seeing an entity with power enough to destroy the world merely sleeping like this after manifesting is wholly unprecedented. And I say that as someone who lives in that very world.”

“Nay, you were burned through and through till you were well and truly dead. I made quite certain of that.”

“Ah, right you are. Burned to death by my own beloved daughter, ha-ha-ha-ha-ha. Wait, no, I suppose that isn’t anything to laugh about. But, well, I exist in some capacity, in any case. And because of that, it would be rather bothersome if the world went and got itself destroyed. But at the same time, as a mage, leaving Diablo to its rest seems altogether a waste. At any rate, though, it won’t wake unless it receives a new order from its contractor.”

As she heard Vlad’s declaration, Hina narrowed her emerald eyes just a hair. As she stood beside Kaito, she laid her hands over the breast of her maid uniform and clasped them together tightly.

“Its contractor...”

Seeing her unease, Kaito drew himself closer to her. After exchanging a glance, the two of them nodded.

Jeanne had already told them who the contractor was.

The Suffering Saint revered by the Church.

She’s the one contracted to the first demon.

The long-sung legend of the world’s restructuring at the hand of the Saint had another, hidden side to it.

Before becoming known as the Saint, she’d formed a contract with the most powerful demon. While it’s unclear what her objective was, she was unable to maintain control and ended up destroying the world. In her regret, she summoned God, formed a contract with Him, and rebuilt the world. But she was unable to endure her two contracts, nor was she able to die, so instead, she fell into a deep slumber—and ever since, the truth had been perverted, leaving the focus solely on the fact that she’d carried God within her body as the savior who rebuilt the world. And because of that, she’d become worshipped as the “Suffering Saint.”

Part of the reason that the order she gave to the First Demon was so effective was probably because she used God’s power for it as well.

As that thought crossed his mind, a small question arose with it. The Saint was supposed to be the only one capable of waking up the first demon. That meant that the people plotting to set the world's rebuilding in motion couldn't wake it up, either. But if that was the case, then where was the woman who possessed that power resting?

An eternal slumber, huh?

Death and sleep were very different. And unlike Diablo, it was conceivable that any human would be able to wake up the Saint. If the Church got their hands on her, they'd be able to implore her to bring about the miracle of restructuring. That was something he and the others definitely needed to prevent.

But where in the world could she be?

"Hey, do we have any idea where the Saint might be? She isn't dead, right? Because if she isn't, then we gotta find her before the Church does."

"You've asked an uncharacteristically pertinent question, mister. Allow me to answer it. We the Church, and for that matter all of humanity, have no idea where the Saint currently rests. And the Church has spared no effort in trying to locate her. But after all their investigations and expeditions, the only things they were able to locate were relics. **And they were hunks of trash, the lot of 'em!** And the other mages and believers looking for her found no more success than they."

"Well...I guess that's good news. That means that there's no way to bring about the world's restructuring. I mean, without the Saint, Diablo won't wake up. And they can't pray to God to start the rebuilding, either, right?"

Kaito felt a deep sense of relief. When he did, though, Jeanne's eyes flashed as though she was looking at an incorrigible dunce. It was impressive, given that the rest of her face was as expressionless as always. Elisabeth heaved a heavy sigh.

Kaito tilted his head to the side, unsure of what had been so stupid about what he'd said. Even after running it all back through his mind, he couldn't find any contradictions. Jeanne shrugged her bare shoulders derisively.

“You really are The Fool, aren’t you, mister? The Church desires the world’s restructuring due to their blind faith in the Saint. Despite knowing of the first demon’s existence, the reconstruction sect still believes the Saint to possess boundless mercy. Because of that, they believe that no matter how they go about destroying the world, the Saint will naturally appear amid the rubble and carry out the rebuilding. Diablo is but one method at their disposal. Of course, they would doubtless prefer to find her themselves and witness the miracle firsthand.”

“Wait, b-but are people even *capable* of such wide-scale destruction on their own?”

“With ease. And especially now that the Church can produce as much of the Monarch’s meat as they desire.”

Elisabeth responded matter-of-factly to Kaito’s doubts. Without a shred of hesitation, she put forth a cruel supposition.

“Let us say, as an example... All they’d have to do is cart a small army of transformed sinners to the border leading to the beastfolk and demi-human lands. War would break out, the forests would burn, and the earth would be shattered. And there’s no shortage of other methods one could conceive of. Just think back to your past life. You should be well acquainted with mankind’s capacity for tyranny, and the means of destruction at their disposal are legion.”

“The Church...the Church would never resort to such inhumane methods!”

Suddenly, Izabella cried out. Kaito and the others all looked at her. Kaito’s gaze was unconsciously tinged with pity. Her silver armor, what had once been proof of her status as a paladin, still shone. But she’d just defeated a monster created by a high priest called the Grave Keeper, and her armor now sported dark stains from its blood.

Ironically, her own body served as a rebuttal to her outcry. Even so, she continued her emotional appeal.

“I’ll concede that ever since the demon subjugation, a group within the Church has been acting suspiciously. Within the paladins, as well. And I’m well aware of how unusual this place is, along with the fact that they worked to conceal it. But the vast majority of the high priests are good, respectable

people. Why are you all so unable to trust in their dignity and virtue? My paladins wouldn't stand for the sorts of atrocities you speak of!"

The more she spoke, the more she affirmed the perversion lurking within the Church. Her voice was full of desperation, as though she was clinging to something. But Jeanne merely looked at her the way one would at a willful child.

"Would you mind being quiet, miss? **It takes a thief to catch a thief, they say! Even if you and your friends get pissed off, it ain't gonna change shit!** Organizations are like centipedes. The body follows the head, even if it doesn't quite know what it's doing. And people would sooner discard their dignity and virtue than be left behind. To put it kindly, it's proof of their loyalty. To put it less kindly, well, sometimes abandoning one's judgment ends up working toward the greater good. This time, however, the head is beyond salvation. **Shit's rotten to the core.**"

"B-but..."

"Godd Deos's death was the turning point, no doubt. With nobody near the head to stop it from running wild, the situation can quickly turn for the worse, with little regard for the opinions of those involved."

Izabella choked back her rebuttal. She was probably well aware of examples where organizations had undergone transformations without their members noticing. Still silent, she bit down on her lip.

Jeanne, on the other hand, went on. Her tone was that of an instructor.

"There exist shepherds who would gladly cast themselves into the fire just to catch a glimpse of a miracle. And most of their sheep will blindly follow after them. Only when the situation becomes irreparable will the people first cry out. *How did things get to this point?* they will say, one and all."

Izabella offered no reply, instead choosing to remain completely silent. But she hadn't given up—she was clearly thinking in earnest about something. Concerned about how deeply she seemed to be brooding, Kaito called out to her.

"Hey, Izabella—"

“Therefore, before the situation reaches the point of no return, we must locate and obtain the Saint.”

Jeanne, though, continued talking, paying no heed to Izabella’s mental anguish. Kaito went quiet for the time being.

At the moment, figuring out their next course of action was of utmost importance.

“If the situation degraded into a race war, reverting it would be nigh impossible, after all. **It’d be like charging straight into Hell! Ain’t shit a group of our size could do about that!**”

“But you have no information on the Saint’s whereabouts, either, aye? What do you intend to do about that?”

“True. But that’s not to say the information doesn’t exist.”

Jeanne offered an unexpected answer to Elisabeth’s question. Kaito frowned.

Who could possibly have information regarding the location of a woman who’d been missing since the very creation of the world?

“Her location may well be known to a single...or rather, perhaps it’s best not to try to count, but they do exist. I’ve spent some time investigating him. But upon learning the secrets of this underground tomb, I find my suspicions have finally turned to confidence.”

The chain on Jeanne’s wrist rattled as she raised an arm. Then she pointed at the wall they had broken the barrier on and passed through. It was currently functioning as a door and was resting ajar, and on its surface was an intricate carving of an apostle wearing tattered rags and standing alongside the Saint.

As he gazed at the apostle’s familiar figure, Kaito muttered meaningfully.

“...The Butcher, huh.”

“This, too, is a reason I sought the assistance of you two Lovers. He is the merchant of legend, one of the founders of the original Five Great Guilds, and known by all with even a passing involvement in trade. And he is also the Saint’s apostle, the Butcher. After working to build the foundations for the circulation of goods within society, he went into hiding for countless ages. But there have

been sightings of him in recent years, all of which have been located around the two of you.”

Kaito instinctively cast his eyes downward. He still hadn’t gotten his emotions in order over this whole ordeal. Hina, standing beside him, was much the same. The Butcher had saved them a number of times, so it was difficult to think of him as an enemy. But according to Elisabeth, he’d declared himself the enemy of no one individually but of every person living in the world.

And he’d supposedly said something else as well.

“They are of little consequence to the result. I’d never thought someone would rise to oppose the dreadful end of the story that the fourteen tragedies mark the beginning of. And Mr. Dim-Witted Servant is the same. Though your two tales may be small in the scope of things, the results they bear may be monumental indeed... Who knows, after all, how the world may turn from here on?”

That doesn’t sound like something the “enemy of the world” would say, does it?

That thought stole through Kaito’s mind unbidden. The Butcher’s words didn’t sound like they’d come from someone who wanted the world to end. But he swallowed down the doubts welling up inside and asked a different question instead.

“Where is the Butcher right now?”

Elisabeth responded to his inquiry by crossing her arms. When she spoke, her voice had a mysteriously quiet ring to it.

“He’s inside a Gibbet within my castle.”

“You, uh, you did mention on the way down here that you’d captured him. But you didn’t just leave him like that, did you?”

“I did. What of it? I can hardly release a man who proclaims himself my enemy. ’Twould be folly.”

“I mean, I guess...”

Surely there are options other than just leaving him chained up, thought Kaito to himself. But the Butcher was notably elusive. Any lesser restraints would

probably have ended with him just slipping out.

Finally satisfied, Kaito turned his gaze away from Elisabeth. It landed on the first demon.

It doesn't matter if it wakes up or keeps sleeping, huh. But we can't let them destroy the world, no matter what method they try to use... Wait, hold on a second.

If that was the case, then just finding the Saint wouldn't be enough to stop the Church from running rampant, would it? Was Jeanne perhaps hoping to get the Saint to persuade the fanatics to stop? That plan seemed altogether dubious, so Kaito posed Jeanne a question.

"Hey, what's your plan for after we find the Saint?"

"Duh, we're gonna kill her ass."

Kaito found himself at a loss for words, and his eyes went wide with shock. He hadn't thought that their plan involved *killing* the Saint. Jeanne's lips curled upward a smidgen. Then, in order to completely crush his naïveté, she elaborated.

"Why do you seem so surprised? If we kill its contractor, Diablo will be unable to stay manifested and vanish. And God, who yet dwells within her body, is no different. When that happens, the two of them will return to a state where mankind's desires cannot possibly reach them. Furthermore, if we deliver her head to our foes, they, too, will understand. 'The miracle is lost to us.' 'Even if we destroy the world, it won't be rebuilt.'"

"But we don't have to *kill* anyone... If we just get her to make the fanatics see reason—"

"Oh my, you would have us rely on the woman who once destroyed the world? Please don't tell me you only just now realized, Hanged Man. The praiseless road we walk down is paved with thorns, and at its end, we shall become true enemies of this world."

Jeanne shook her head in exasperation, her thick honey-blond hair gently scattering across her shoulders.

She still bore no expression, but her rose-colored eyes opened alarmingly wide as she made her declaration.

“Our salvation lies in murdering Diablo, murdering God, and, yes, murdering a human.”



A heavy silence spread throughout the dimness of the underground tomb.

Kaito still offered no reply. Hina gently placed her hand atop his arm. The Kaiser let out a deep, humanlike laugh. As she scratched gently at her own black hair, Elisabeth spoke in an annoyed tone.

“Hmm... The Saint bears God within her body, so I have concerns about our ability to actually kill her. I suppose we’ll know once we try. Steady your resolve, if naught else.”

“Yeah, no, I’m okay. I’d be fine even without you telling me that.”

“Very well, then.”

“I do appreciate it, though.”

“Ha. Appreciate what exactly?”

Elisabeth scoffed at Kaito’s words of thanks. Even so, he nodded back at her. Jeanne’s declaration had come as a blow to him, but he was already over it. He’d seen grisly mountains of corpses before, and starting with Marianne, he’d killed his fair share of people.

There was no reason for him to be fixated on the Saint’s survival.

And besides, once we meet her in the flesh, everything might change on the spot. Right now, we should just worry about getting the Butcher to talk.

“It seems there are no objections to our current course of action, then, so I think we’d best be off. **Going back the way we came ain’t too glamorous or anything, but them’s the breaks.** All the barriers are destroyed, but the building itself is designed to block teleportation. To go to the Torture Princess’s castle, we need to first make our way outside.”

And with that, Jeanne practically danced her way out of the nursery. The Kaiser scoffed in displeasure, but he, Vlad, Elisabeth, and Izabella, who was still

being carried by Deus Ex Machina, followed after her.

Accompanied by Hina, Kaito started walking out of the nursery as well. But as he approached the doorway, he stopped in his tracks. His leather soles screeched against the ground. Then he turned back, the hem of his military-style long coat rustling as he did so.

As he stared fixatedly at the horrific nursery, he called out to one of the people behind him.

“Hey, Vlad. You said that even without this room’s messed-up setup...even without the pacification from the pain, the First Demon won’t wake up, right?”

“Verily, my dear successor. This room was crafted out of an overabundance of fear. It’s meaningless, and dare I say even comical...so I have my suspicions as to your intentions.”

“You’re not going to stop me, even though you’re onto me?”

“Perish the thought! True, your actions are hypocritical, grounded in a trivial sense of mercy! Yet, at the same time, they will lead you one step closer toward becoming a worthy vessel to inherit my will—after all, what you’re thinking of doing is a privilege extended only to the strong! Hypocrisy leads to arrogance, and from them flower the origins of all sadism and tyranny! Please defile them all you wish!”

“Huh... Well, if that’s the way you see it, at least you won’t get in my way.”

Kaito nodded as he gave his blunt reply. Then he cast a fleeting glance outside the room.

Vlad was spreading his arms exaggeratedly wide. At some point, Jeanne and the others had stopped as well. Elisabeth was shrugging at the very edge of his vision, as though calling him a fool. But Kaito knew.

If I hadn’t stopped, you’d have come up with some excuse to do this yourself, wouldn’t you?

The only bewildered member of the group was Hina. She looked back and forth between Kaito and the nursery. Before long, though, her expression stiffened with resolve. Gripping her halberd tightly, she stepped in front of

Kaito.

“My dear Master Kaito, I, too, have grasped your intentions. You are far gentler than any other and far more merciful...and that is precisely why it will hurt you so. Please let me do—”

“No. This isn’t something I should be foisting off on my wife. I’m gonna do it. I have to.”

Her offer was kind, but Kaito turned it down. With Hina looking to be on the verge of tears, he patted her head, then gestured for her to leave. After waiting until Hina was a safe distance away, Kaito took a deep breath and raised an arm above his head.

Then he snapped his fingers.

Six blades appeared out of the empty air, deploying in a circle with the cradle at their center like the middle of a flower. They glittered sharply as they turned toward the walls and ceiling. After coming to eerily precise stops, they waited for their master’s cue.

Kaito murmured quietly, as though trying to persuade himself.

“It’s a job befitting the enemy of mankind.”

Then he snapped his fingers again.

“La (kill them all).”

The blades shot out with the speed of a guillotine dropping, the six of them carving up the walls and ceiling in unison. That is to say, they sliced up the victims installed therein.

They’d all been cursed so as to avoid letting them die. But the curse wasn’t nearly effective enough to protect against Kaito’s magically empowered attack. Their lives, which had been held perpetually just shy of death’s grasp, instantly came to an end.

One after another, the soundless screams faded.

But the slaughter went on.

Blood sprayed in all directions, drenching the room in a ghastly shade of red.

It looked almost as though six beasts had leaped from Diablo's cradle and savagely sliced their way through the room. And the noise of the walls and ceiling sounded like an orchestra. Kaito, in his black uniform, played the role of the conductor, waving his arm both violently and delicately. The blades were his instrumentalists, and they wove their shearing melody in accordance with his directions.

The time it took felt like it lasted an eternity. But every performance must eventually come to an end.

Ten or twenty seconds later, Kaito swung his arm wide, then brought it to a sudden stop.

All at once, the blade disappeared. Silence descended upon the room. The only sound left was the faint trickling of blood.

The nursery-like chamber had been completely ruined. Chunks of flesh and viscera littered the floor, and everything in sight was red. A thick, rusty smell began filling the air.

Amid the tragic spectacle, the first demon slumbered gently, as though nothing had changed. Kaito averted his gaze from it, instead looking at the blood gathering at his feet. As he faced the vast pool of red, he let out a gentle whisper.

"Good night, everyone. Sweet dreams."

In a sense, his words were tinged with madness. But they came from the heart.

After all, he'd heard a continuous scream from the moment he'd first set foot in the room. It was a striking, sorrowful plea, one that only someone who'd experienced extreme pain could perceive.

Please kill us, they'd been saying.

Please make it all end.

The people being used to pacify Diablo had long since gone mad from the pain. But in spite of that, they'd never stopped their desperate supplication. And now Kaito could hear their pitiful cries no more.

He cast his gaze around the room, his expression full of affection and sadness. He looked to make sure they were all dead, that there were no sacrifices left in the room. After determining that to be the case, he let his face turn serious again.

Having coldly wiped away his expression, the Kaiser's contractor turned on his heel. Then, alone, he began walking.

Hurriedly, Hina rushed back into the nursery. Clutching the hem of her skirt, she faced the grisly spectacle and offered a deep bow. After closing her eyes for a moment as though in prayer, she ran back over to her companion's side. Nestling close to Kaito, Hina squeezed his hand in hers.

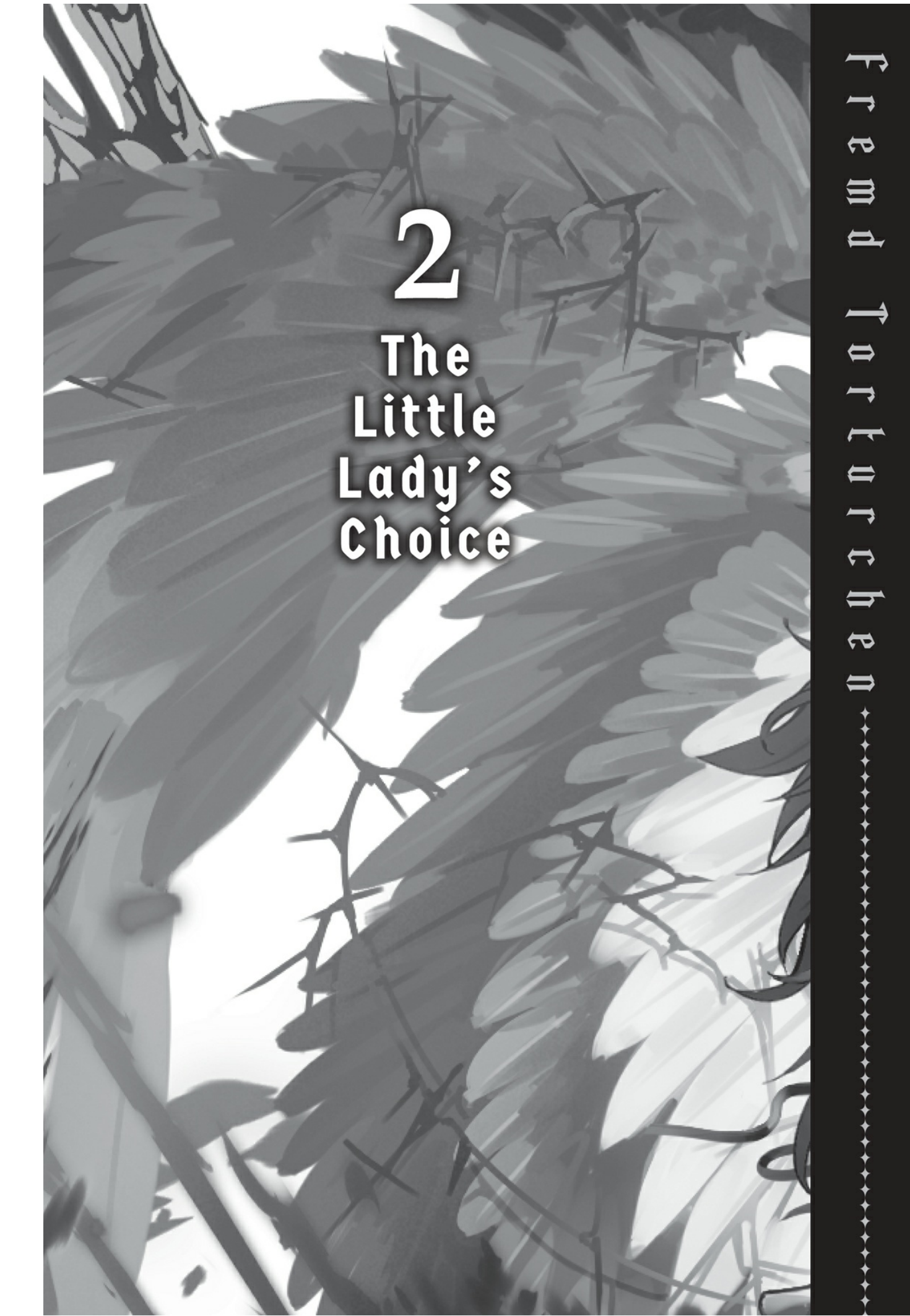
He stayed facing forward, as though nothing had happened. But he returned his wife's grasp and intertwined his fingers with hers.

Ever so faintly, his hand was trembling.

Jeanne de Rais

A young girl who calls herself the saint, the whore, and the Torture Princess.
Could she be the maiden of salvation?





2

The Little Lady's Choice

F r e m d T o r l o r c h e n

2

The Little Lady's Choice

Officially, the underground tomb's sixth floor didn't exist.

Everything past it was blockaded off by a colorful barrier, and the architecture took a turn for the bizarre. But once Kaito and the others ascended the seemingly endless staircase and returned to the fifth floor, the rest of the tomb was as calm and sanctified as ever.

They walked down the long passageway. Individually crafted mausoleums of the kings of old lined them on either side. Even with the tomb's innermost secrets laid bare, the resting kings on the upper floors were unperturbed.

As he cast a sidelong glance at the extravagantly decorated mausoleums, Kaito posed a question to Jeanne.

"Did any of the kings know about the First Demon?"

"Who can say? I imagine it depends on how close to the Church and how devout they each were. For example, I think the odds that the third king, hailed as the 'Faithful King,' was informed are quite high. He gave his generation's Grave Keeper special rights, after all, and their relationship was rather cordial. **They're all crazy!**"

"Makes sense. Still, though, for some of the kings to find out about it and still give it their endorsement... Fanaticism's a hell of a drug, I guess."

Kaito turned his gaze toward what appeared to be the third king's mausoleum. Compared to the other kings' mausoleums, its design was rather plain. It didn't even sport flowers, although the uncouth suits of armor surrounding the sarcophagus within hinted that the third king had specialized in battle. The only piece of ornamentation that could be described as beautiful was the statue of the Saint hanging upside down from the ceiling.

Perhaps the cause of his faith had been a desire for divine protection in his

countless wars. Now the Saint was always watching over him. Red gemstones were embedded in the sarcophagus's lid, even replicating the Saint's tearstains.

That's one messed-up charade they're pulling.

Kaito leveled a blunt rejection of the king's beliefs that he was clearly adhering to even in death. But he chose not to voice that impression of his. Instead, he asked a different question.

"What about the current king, then?"

"His predecessor died early, so he is still a whelp. I'd wager they haven't told him a thing. Ha, he'd likely faint on the spot."

This time, it was Elisabeth who answered. Jeanne then offered a follow-up.

"He also entrusted the battle against the demons wholly to the Church and has done little in the way of mobilizing troops on his own. As a result, the Royal Knights generally just obey the Holy Knights' orders. The Church no doubt saw that as an opportunity to seize greater power, but Godd Deos refused to use their strength as a pretext to meddle in domestic affairs. **That geezer was a pain in the ass, but I gotta give him credit for being a decent guy.** At some point, though, the king's advisers began tithing more and more, and their ranks grew flush with the pious. That being the case, it's anyone's guess as to what would happen if the king found out about the first demon."

The two Torture Princesses exchanged a glance, then shrugged. Their billowing blond and straight black heads of hair shook.

Kaito sighed. He knew almost nothing about the current king. But unlike the third imperial beastfolk princess, Vyade Ula Forstlast, he didn't seem like he'd be particularly reliable if things got down to the wire.

It's gonna be rough, not having any influential humans who are sympathetic to our cause.

Kaito sank into thought. Once he stopped talking, his surroundings grew quiet as well.

Eventually, the group approached the stairwell to the entrance. As they did, Kaito looked up, thinking he'd heard something. Noise from the surface was

finally starting to reach them, running down the stairs and echoing off the thick walls.

Someone's shouting orders. And that's a lot of armor, swords, and footsteps I hear.

Kaito cautiously strained his ears to make out the intermingling sounds. As a consequence, he found himself inadvertently frowning.

"Sounds like they've got quite the crowd up there, huh."

"I should certainly think so. Izabella and I originally came on orders from the Church to kill you, after all. And I did happen to destroy Yah Llodl's communication device before we entered the tomb, not to mention the fact that we left the paladins behind. 'Twould have been stranger if they *hadn't* called in reinforcements."

"...Oh, right. That makes sense."

As he bore the brunt of Elisabeth's exasperation, Kaito thought back to their battle from a few hours ago. He and Elisabeth had traded blows directly in front of the underground tomb. However, he'd been so engrossed in the fight that he hadn't spared much thought as to what would come afterward. And afterward, their entire worldview had been turned on its head.

Everything just changed so quickly.

Kaito's gaze grew distant. As she stood in front of him, Elisabeth went on.

"The only reason we weren't attacked while we investigated this place was the strict orders the paladins received not to enter it. The fewer people who know the truth, the better for them, so the reconstruction sect no doubt plans to destroy us the moment we pop our heads out. However, therein lies a problem."

"A problem?"

"Indeed. Our foe is the Church."

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"You forget so quickly, fool. The Church has me bound with shackles."

Kaito's mouth hung agape in realization. Now that she mentioned it, he remembered.

Elisabeth had been ordered to slay the fourteen demons as a chance to atone for her sins. But because she was a sinner without peer, the Church had placed shackles on her body so that she couldn't betray them. If one of their priests recited scripture, the shackles would activate.

That meant that Elisabeth's ability to oppose the Church was diminished. But Jeanne merely shook her head.

"I don't think we'll find that to be much of a problem. This is the Capital. The reconstruction sect won't be able to deploy their transformed paladins. And even if they wanted to use a saint, it would take them too long to get a permit issued. In other words, the force at their disposal is currently quite low. No matter how much cannon fodder they call out, cannon fodder is still cannon fodder. After Deus Ex Machina tosses them aside in one fell swoop, I can activate my teleportation circle. **Hunting mice is a specialty of mine, y'see.** I don't mind taking the lead this time."

"I see, how reliable of you. I've no objections."

Elisabeth readily nodded to Jeanne's suggestion. Kaito, too, was relieved.

Jeanne's Deus Ex Machina was even more robust and powerful than him, the Kaiser's contractor, and Hina, an automaton. Buying enough time to activate a teleportation circle would be a piece of cake for it. But although he gave the plan his approval, he made sure to add a warning, as well.

"Just make sure you don't kill any of the paladins. They're only following their beliefs, after all."

"Given the current situation, that alone is foolhardy in the extreme. **Abandoning critical thought is a crime. Ignorance is sin. Sheep end up as mutton, as they say.** But if we consider what's to come, it's true that unnecessary bloodshed will likely prove disadvantageous. And my little lady would object, as well. Agreed. We should avoid letting things get too complicated here."

Surprisingly, Jeanne obediently nodded. Behind her, Izabella went slack as she

breathed a sigh of relief. It seemed that she'd been on the verge of shouting out. If things had gone poorly, it might have even ended in a fight.

Kaito was glad it had gotten resolved peacefully. All in agreement, they headed toward the entrance. Light from outside streamed down onto the stone stairs. Kaito then stopped, calling out to Jeanne as he did.

"Hold up a minute. Before you send out Deus Ex Machina, we should have one of us get a visual on the situation up there. I'll go—if they fire off some kind of long-range attack, I can block it with my blades."

"...Well, I suppose that's true. Your doll has a rather anxious expression on her face, mister, but you are in fact qualified. **Guess you finally get to be useful for once, huh?** After you, then."

Despite the verbal abuse he was receiving, Kaito climbed up the stairs.

Because they'd been made from a different material, the steps near the top had been melted when the demon attacked the Capital. Making sure not to fall, Kaito carefully jumped over the pit. Then he popped his head out through the entrance.

"Let's see, here... Man, that's quite the crowd."

The silver troops were lined up atop the gray earth at regular intervals like chess pieces. There was also a group Kaito wasn't familiar with beside them, covered from head to toe in scarlet cloth. Due to the way their faces were covered, they looked almost like executioners.

Man, I'm not getting a good vibe from those guys... Hmm?

At that moment, a sense of incongruity washed over Kaito. While it was true that the underground tomb was completely surrounded, their enemies were all standing strangely far away. Kaito frowned as he tried to find the reason.

Then he noticed the bizarre-looking man standing in front of the assembled troops.

Say...what?

The man had a sturdy frame, enough that Kaito could make out his gender despite the distance between them. He had broad shoulders, and his height

was on the taller side. In spite of that, though, the hem of his white robes reached all the way to the ground, as did his thick, bristly black hair. That alone would have been enough to qualify his appearance as strange, but his most conspicuous feature was the thick chains binding his arms around himself in an embrace.

Kaito couldn't help compare him to the other bound saint he was familiar with.

H-huh? He...looks kinda like La Mules, doesn't he?

As that thought crossed through Kaito's mind, the chains binding the man's top half came loose without warning. He slowly spread his arms wide. When Kaito saw what was between them, a shiver of terror ran through his body.

"...!"

The man's chest had been excavated, clothes and all. The red flesh within had been shaved down, and his white rib cage lay bare. For some reason, though, there was no blood pouring out. The heart, lungs, and other organs a rib cage was normally designed to protect were missing as well. In their place were a large number of white feathered creatures.

A second later, realization hit Kaito. The man was using his rib cage as a birdcage.

"La (fly)!"

Spurred on by instinctual fear, Kaito snapped his fingers. A blade went soaring toward the man. At the same time, white light flared up in the man's chest, then burst out. The two collided head-on. While the blade was successfully blocking the light, it melted like candy in the process before evaporating. Kaito shot out his second attack. But to his disbelief, the man was faster. He shot out more light, this time even brighter than the first. The white entity swallowed up the blade, but this time, it didn't stop.

Kaito's eyes widened in shock. The light bore down on him.

An unpleasant blasting noise rang out.

As it did, the light burned away the tomb's entrance.



“Master Kaito, no!”

“Wh—?”

It all happened in a single moment.

Right before the light made impact, something grabbed Kaito by the scruff and yanked him backward. His back toppled into Hina’s chest. After embracing him, she leaped back over the melted pit in the stairwell, then crouched down.

White light burst over their heads, accompanied by the sound of an explosion.

Kaito looked up. When he did, he saw that the metal decorations at the tomb’s entrance that had miraculously survived were glowing red and dripping. If Hina had been even a hair slower, he would have died on the spot.

“Th-thanks, Hina... Geez, I seriously misjudged that guy’s power.”

“Oh, Master Kaito... Thank goodness, thank goodness you’re safe... I was so worried for you.”

Still sitting firmly on the ground, Hina squeezed Kaito tightly.

As one might expect from the fact it had survived the demon invasion, everything from halfway up the stairs down was unmarred. The building material itself must have had a powerful anti-magic effect to it. But the bombardment showed no signs of letting up.

They’d lost the ability to carelessly go outside. Jeanne blinked, her rosy eyes flashing.

“...Well now. This falls outside my expectations.”

“Aye, it boggles the mind. What exactly is the meaning of this? Forgoing all the proper procedures to deploy a saint, then a summoned beast bombardment without so much as passing a verdict on us? Have they gone mad? No, wait... Ah!”

Elisabeth clicked her tongue, looking as though she’d just realized something. When she spoke, her tone was filled with vexation.

“The completed request, the one they submitted as part of the plan to defend

the Capital immediately after La Mules's death! Blast, we overlooked it!"

"I suspect your hypothesis is correct. We should assume they used the permit we obtained back then. Under the pretext of killing the Kaiser's contractor and putting an end to the battle against the demons, fast-tracking its transfer would certainly be possible. And as for that light..."

The one who replied to Elisabeth was Izabella. Still cradled in Deus Ex Machina's arms, she thoughtfully observed the exploding white light. Kaito followed her lead.

Now that he looked closely, he could see that the light was made up of tiny skylark-like creatures. Saints' power came from sacred beasts. The man's birds were clearly far weaker than the one La Mules had been able to deploy, but in exchange, he was able to shoot them out repeatedly.

Jeanne shook her head in annoyance.

"As far as the reconstruction sect is concerned, the end is nigh, after all. They're starting to move more brazenly. **'The sky is falling; the sky is falling! Let's all dance, guys, memento fuckin' mori!'**"

"Ugh, I feel like destroying that communication device didn't do us any favors."

Kaito prefaced his comment with a groan as he thought back to the device Yah Llodl had been using to communicate.

The orb that Elisabeth had mercilessly skewered had been needlessly extravagant and flashy. He didn't know where Yah Llodl ranked in the Church, but the man's pride was all too evident.

Kaito had no doubt that Yah Llodl's anger was only worsening his animosity toward himself and the others. That said, figuring out what their foes were thinking wasn't going to help them much at this point.

This is a problem... If we can't get outside, we can't activate the teleportation circle.

Kaito furrowed his brow. The bombardment showed no signs of letting up. Elisabeth clicked her tongue in frustration.

“Tch, the intervals are too short. What to do. Send out Deus Ex Machina, perhaps? ’Tis fast and sturdy. Even so, it would doubtless be whittled away in short order. And you have to temporarily disassemble to activate the teleportation circle, eh... On the off chance they have a second saint in reserve, that would prove troublesome indeed. I wouldn’t mind activating the circle myself, but if they set off the shackles midway through, maintaining it would be no mean feat.”

“I concur. We seem to have quite the problem on our hands. If the Kaiser offered his help, it would make things a deal easier, but... **The bad doggy’s got a lot of pride, if nothing else!**”

“Hmm? Did the puny human say something? Seems to me like you fancy getting yourself bitten in two.”

“Quit fighting, all of you. I will go.”

A dignified voice rang out, remonstrating them. Everyone turned to look at the speaker: Izabella. Still sitting in Deus Ex Machina’s grasp, her arm was raised and her face was earnest.

Jeanne blinked her eyes rapidly a few times. A few seconds later, her head slumped sharply to the side.

“Have you lost your mind, miss?”

“I suppose I probably have. But I suspect my odds of success are better than you think. Now, let! Me! Down!”

Izabella contorted her body, her cynical remarks accompanied by a smile. Somehow, she was able to slip out from Deus Ex Machina’s arms. After gracefully hopping down onto the floor, she gave a long exhale.

Then she turned her blue and purple eyes toward the incessant explosions of light going off above them. She narrowed her gaze.

“I know the man who summons those beasts—La Christoph, the Modest Birdkeeper. I’ve had the honor of visiting with him a number of times. He possesses a firm spirit. Even after formally becoming a saint, he still recognized me and offered me kind words of advice.”

“That’s...impressive.”

Izabella’s words filled Kaito with earnest admiration. After all, La Mules, a similar saint, had lost her reason and humanity and become little more than an animal. Maybe it had just been the case that La Christoph’s connection to God was weaker than hers had been, but odds were that his force of will was astounding.

At the same time, being reminded of how brazenly the Church retained their saints caused Kaito to realize just how perverse of an organization it was.

The cracks were always there—the current situation just tore them wide open.

The time had finally come. The Church’s shell had cracked, and the terrible monstrosity within was now free.

That was really all there was to it. While the twisted imagery was floating through Kaito’s mind, Izabella continued laying out her plan.

“Even after being recognized as a saint, La Christoph persisted in his deep love for the people. I strongly doubt he knows anything about the plan to reconstruct the world. I’ll need someone to block two or three of his attacks for me, but if I call out to him, I believe there’s a good chance he’ll stop.”

Izabella was totally serious. But Elisabeth crossed her arms and shook her head.

“You expect a saint to see sense while firing off a bombardment? The odds are lower than low.”

“If I die, then all it will mean is that my work up until now was unworthy of being remembered. In that event, I will accept my fate. And I apologize, but you’ll need to come up with a new plan.”

Izabella’s voice was calm, and the evenness of her tone served to illustrate just how composed she was. Kaito reflexively shuddered. The degree of certainty in her voice was alarming.

“Izabella, no!”

“Oh, Master Kaito—”

Kaito hurriedly stood up, wrenching himself free from Hina’s arms. Then he

turned to face Izabella.

He stared straight into her mismatched, gemstone-like eyes.

“Izabella, you can’t! Whether or not that saint guy will remember you isn’t the problem! It’s what’ll happen to you afterward. If your plan works, you won’t be able to go back to the Church. Hell, even trying to will be off the table. I’m not gonna let you go through with some plan that’ll get you killed, whether it works or not!”

Kaito’s voice rose to a shout. When Izabella replied with silence, Kaito clenched his fists.

The odds were low that Izabella’s callout would stop the bombardment, but they weren’t zero. But if they wanted to use that opportunity to activate a teleportation circle, it would mean leaving her behind. The moment Izabella showed signs of fleeing, the saint would no doubt recommence his attack on the spot.

She was, of course, a member of the Church, and the commander of the Holy Knights to boot. But given the Church’s current state, even someone of her standing wouldn’t be able to return safely. The situation over there was anything but upstanding.

That was just how deep the roots of evil had sunk into it. The entire organization had gone completely mad.

“Even if it was just because Jeanne kidnapped you, you still ended up going into the underground tomb. You can pretend not to have seen anything, but there’s no way they’ll believe you. And I bet the Grave Keeper will be especially pissed.”

Kaito’s thoughts turned to the perverse nursery down in the depths of the tomb. There had been a monster with a snowy owl’s head and a huge mass of tentacles stationed in front of it as a guard. It had been made by taking a holy summoned beast, feeding it demon meat, and mixing in human parts.

That torture room, its guardian... It takes more than run-of-the-mill fanaticism to make messed-up shit like that.

The Grave Keeper must not have had a moral bone in their body.

And back in Jeanne's hometown, Kaito had seen those hideously transfigured paladins, too. It was unclear whether they'd done so willingly, but all of them had eaten demon meat.

Either way, even if they'd left them alive, there was no way to save people who'd undergone transformations like that.

"If you go back, they're just gonna dispose of you. If you're lucky, all they'll do is kill you. You can't go back; it's over!"

"I refuse to believe that! Or rather, I want to...but even I can see the truth."

Izabella answered frankly. Her voice was calm. So calm, in fact, that it filled Kaito with ominous premonitions. Izabella wasn't even trying to deny the evil lurking within the Church anymore. But even so, her smile remained.

"There would normally be no shortage of people who would defend me and ensure my sentence was just. But at this rate, I'm likely to be judged behind closed doors, without my allies knowing about it. Even so, there are things I still must do. You see, I *want* to go back to the Church."

"That's crazy talk..."

"I have to make sure as many of the Holy Knights know the truth as possible. If things continue as they are, they're liable to be taken advantage of."

"But you can't seriously think you're gonna get a chance to—"

"Even if I don't. I can't just sit back and watch my subordinates die."

Izabella's words were matter-of-fact. She'd clearly had her mind made up for some time now.

It was at that moment that Kaito realized something. He and Elisabeth didn't have that many people they needed to protect. At the end of the day, both of them were criminals. But Izabella was different. Many people had placed their trust and loyalty in her.

"The Holy Knights' main force has to receive any untoward orders. But it's only a matter of time. It's as Ms. Jeanne says: Organizations are, for better or for worse, like long centipedes. I refuse to let my people unknowingly destroy the very people, the very world they're trying to protect."

“Even so, you still—”

“I understand how you feel. Or rather, allow me to pretend to sympathize despite being wholly incapable of understanding. Still, though, foolish little lady, I must ask that you stop.”

An unexpected voice called out to restrain Izabella. Jeanne stepped forward and stood beside Kaito. She, too, didn’t hesitate to give her warning. Deus Ex Machina stooped over, as though trying to scoop Izabella back up.

Falling away a step, Izabella took on a defensive pose.

Jeanne pointed a pale finger at her. It hung in the air as Jeanne tried to elucidate the situation.

“I didn’t bring you along just to let the Church pass judgment on you, miss. I needed someone besides the Torture Princess and her servant who knew the truth of the world and was able to help convey it. Someone who was affiliated with the Church yet could accept the truth without breaking. That was what I chose you from among the stray sheep for.”

“So I supposed. I had the sense that your expectations for me were something along those lines.”

“It wasn’t so you could die a dog’s death. **Don’t forget. Death is absolute. If you die, that’s it. Game over.**”

“...Forgive me. I understand the importance of the task you’ve given me. But would you be able to find someone else to carry it out? I have my own task I need to finish, you see.”

Izabella flatly refused to heed Jeanne’s warning. Narrowing her rosy eyes, Jeanne made to set Deus Ex Machina into motion. As things were, Izabella had no means to resist. But with a gentle expression, she repeated back the words Jeanne had once thrust at her.

“I am a commander, though perhaps only in name.”

“...”

For once in her life, a look of surprise crossed Jeanne’s face.

Izabella began walking. It was easy to make out the unwavering pride in her

gait, as was the fact that stopping her would accomplish nothing. She walked past Jeanne, practically daring her to act. Her silver hair nearly grazed Jeanne's honey-blond locks.

Standing straight up, Jeanne let out a quiet whisper.

"...What a fool you are."

Taking her cue, Deus Ex Machina sprang into motion. But instead of trying to capture Izabella this time, it strode directly forward. It seemed that the steel giant intended to serve as Izabella's shield, just as she'd requested.

"You can't..."

Still refusing to give up, Kaito raised his voice. But the timing with which Izabella turned around indicated that she'd seen that coming. As light continued to explode at her back, her voice was the image of composure.

"Farewell, ladies and gentlemen. Dreadful as it was, I'm glad I was able to learn the truth. Even now, I still hold that the Church's teachings are wonderful. Using faith as a way to support a life lived nobly and properly is an honorable thing. People are weak. They need something to believe in. So as a member of the Church, I will fight to my last to right its wrongs."

Kaito sucked in his breath. Even after learning so many ugly truths, Izabella retained her piety and pride as the commander of the Holy Knights. Her next words were stern, and her voice rang with conviction.

"That is why, Kaito Sena, Elisabeth Le Fanu, Jeanne de Rais, even if history ends up validating your actions, I cannot become like you."

With quiet yet unfaltering words, Izabella issued a complete rejection of Kaito and the others.

The ebony and gold Torture Princesses said nothing. Kaito, too, gazed silently at lacerations running across Izabella's skin and her tranquil eyes. His thoughts turned to the metaphor he'd just heard.

There exist shepherds who would gladly cast themselves into the fire just to catch a glimpse of a miracle.

And their sheep would follow after them, blind to the foolishness of their own

actions.

Even though she was just a lone sheep, Izabella was trying to shout out warnings to the rest. She was likely to find herself cut down in the blink of an eye. But even so, she refused to abandon her flock.

Izabella Vicker is a noble person through and through.

Authority and cajolery would utterly fail to make her falter. And she had the rare power to not only believe in her own sense of justice but to put it into action, too.

Which means that there's no way she'd ever become an enemy of the world.

Kaito now felt that fact keenly. In other words, it was pointless trying to get her to stay by their side any longer.

Kaito and the others were enemies of the world, and the road before them was paved with thorns.

At the end of the day, what we're trying to do is kill God and the Saint.

Trying to coerce someone who was living their life nobly and properly wasn't possible. Satisfied with that fact, Kaito threw in the towel.

Elisabeth quietly clicked her tongue. Her sleek black hair rustled as she shook her head.

"Ha, do as you please. If one persists in their foolery, that, too, is a form of conviction. If you have no regrets, then go forth and die unburdened. Your brand of idiocy may differ from mine, but we are both idiots nonetheless."

"That we are, I suppose. Idiots, one and all."

Izabella's smile was tinged with a hint of embarrassment. The lacerations running across her face twisted unattractively.

Yet, even so, Izabella Vicker was beautiful.

The next moment, she dashed up the stairs. Her silver hair fluttered as she broke into a run.

Explosions of white light rocked the entrance she was heading for.



With surprisingly fluid motions, Deus Ex Machina took the lead from Izabella.

The steel giant was the first to rush outside. Izabella followed unflinchingly after. The bombardment exploded across Deus Ex Machina. Protected by its massive body, Izabella shouted out.

“Please stop, La Christoph! It’s me, Izabella Vicker! I have something I wish to report! Everyone, please, you have to listen to me!”

Tragically, her voice was drowned out. It looked as though the attacks would continue. But she didn’t give up.

“Rgh!”

Seizing the tiniest of gaps between explosions, Izabella made her move, leaping out from behind Deus Ex Machina. Having abandoned her shield, Izabella laid herself exposed before La Christoph.

“It’s time for us to move.”

“Indeed.”

If they didn’t leave then, they wouldn’t make it in time. With no room to doubt whether or not Izabella would succeed, Jeanne and Elisabeth dashed forward. Kaito and Hina followed after them. With a singularly nonchalant air, the Kaiser shook his head in exasperation and did the same. Vlad floated along behind, a wide grin plastered across his face.

Together, they passed through the entrance.

Unbelievably, the bombardment had stopped. It was almost miraculous how quiet their surroundings were.

They could see a priest wearing a lavish vestment shouting something at La Christoph. He was undoubtedly trying to get him to resume the bombardment. But as he gazed at Izabella in bewilderment, La Christoph obstinately refused to open his arms. The priest shouted again, even louder.

“What the hell are you doing? Why show mercy to someone who’s been won over by the demons?”

As he did, Izabella’s subordinates started moving at once. They all rushed over to the priest. The group that looked like executioners tried to get them to fall

back, but the paladins gave determined shouts.

“Please, that’s not it! Our commander was taken against her will!”

“Bah! Back, you lot, back! What are you thinking?!”

“You’re the one trying to dispose of our kidnapped commander all on your own! What are *you* thinking?!”

“She’s fallen into the demons’ clutches!”

“We told you, she was abducted! We’re not going to just let you blow away our commander!”

Disorder swelled through their ranks. Taking full advantage of the opportunity, Deus Ex Machina collapsed into pieces. The steel giant’s body separated into a number of chunks. From them, four machines landed atop the ashen earth.

One of them was a beast made of nothing but fangs. Another was an automaton, shaped like a human except for its fatally warped frame. One of the other monsters was a lizard with limbs made from pipes and wings of glass. And the final one was a bipedal suit of armor with no visible seams anywhere on its body.

The chains on Jeanne’s wrists jingled. Taking their cue, the machines began spinning.

White light started glittering in a circle around them, and golden flower petals danced up through the air. The teleportation circle began activating, leaving Izabella behind. The priest went slack-jawed. La Christoph continued looking solely at Izabella. She made no motions to flee, so La Christoph chose not to resume his attack.

“Get ahold of yourselves! Don’t let them get away, dammit—stop them!”

As he shouted orders at the fighting paladins, the priest began chanting to activate Elisabeth’s shackles. As she stood beside Kaito, her skin started burning, and she let out a small cry of pain.

“Urk—”

“Elisabeth...”

“Lady Elisabeth.”

Kaito and Hina supported her shoulders. However, Elisabeth wasn't the one giving the chant for the summoning circle—Jeanne was. The light gradually grew in strength. The paladins and the executioner-like group frantically rushed toward them.

As they did, Jeanne gently extended her hand. Making sure she wasn't seen by the people closing in on them, she lifted a tuft of Izabella's hair. Then she kissed her, like a knight kissing a princess's hand.

Izabella's shoulders twitched. But she didn't turn around.

Finally, Jeanne offered a surreptitious murmur to her dignified back.

“I don't hate seeing a mere human trying to oppose them. After all, such actions are the ones that are supposed to change the world. You may be an idiot, a dunce, and a fool, miss, but I choose to believe that your actions helped delay the clock hands in their march toward the end. **You did catch my eye, and the eyes never lie.**”

With slight vestiges of sorrow, Jeanne let go of the silver hair. As she did, she offered a quiet farewell.

“Good-bye, my stupid, gallant little lady.”



*

The next moment, the paladins and executioner-like group rushed in. Metal flower petals and white light blotted out their figures, but the moment before they faded from vision, a scene burned its way into Kaito's eyes.

Losing a close struggle to the executioner-like group, the paladins were forced back. Countless arms draped in crimson cloth reached out. Then, one after another, they grabbed Izabella.

And then, finally, she was pushed forcefully down onto the ground.



3

Something Left Behind

F r e m d T o r l o r c h e n

3

Something Left Behind

The gold petals and white light dissolved together to form a solid, cylindrical wall. Then, immediately afterward, it crumbled. The fragments gently melted, transformed into droplets, and crashed against the stone floor. When each one landed, it sent a small crimson splash into the air.

“...Crimson?”

Kaito tilted his head to the side in confusion. Then he noticed the second magic circle at their feet.

The blood it was comprised of was recoiling at Jeanne’s mana, causing it to bounce up off the ground. As a result, their surroundings were like a rain of light pouring atop a sea of blood.

After looking at the room he was in, Kaito furrowed his brow.

“Huh? Wait, don’t tell me this is...”

“Jeanne, you little... I must say, I was expecting we would arrive in the forest nearby. Why is it that you’re able to leap directly to my castle? When was it you interfered with my teleportation circle?”

Her skin still covered in burn marks from the Church’s shackles, Elisabeth crossed her arms.

They had all successfully arrived in the wide chamber beneath Elisabeth’s castle that sported her permanent teleportation circle. But teleporting directly to it wasn’t supposed to be possible for anyone who hadn’t themselves activated it previously.

Everyone turned to look at Jeanne. Her abundant golden locks shook as she tilted her head to the side.

“What are you talking about, miss? Why, you daringly left your castle exposed

so as to invite attacks by the fourteen demons, did you not? **Shit, you had openings everywhere!** In other words, sending in a familiar to invade your castle and tamper with your teleportation circle was no grand undertaking. **But hey, don't sweat the small stuff!"**

Her unabashed response earned her a murderous glare from Elisabeth. But it was true that, thanks to the fact that they'd traveled directly to the castle, their arrival had been quicker than they'd anticipated. Letting out a short sigh, Elisabeth started walking. Her heels clicked loudly as she went.

"Very well. I'm hardly pleased, but I shall overlook it this once. This *once*. Now then, let's be off."

"Um, Lady Elisabeth, we should treat your injuries first..."

Hina timidly called out to her. As she stopped in her tracks, Elisabeth's harsh expression softened. But despite Hina's frantic pleas, she just gently shook her head.

"How kind you are to the woman you once betrayed... No, no, stop looking at me with those teary eyes! It feels as though I'm kicking a puppy. I had no intention of being snide to *you*, Hina. What I was trying to say was that you needn't worry, that I would cast healing magic myself later, when we have time to spare. Aye."

"Wait...doesn't that mean that if you were talking to me, you *would* mean it snidely?"

"How astute he is! I should surely think so. 'Tis your own fault for being so wholly unlovable. You're a man; deal with it."

"Well then, I'll just have to praise Master Kaito so sweetly that it all balances out!"

"Uh... I dunno if 'balances out' is really the way you're supposed to look at it..."

Despite the crisis situation they were in, the banter the three of them exchanged was light. Kaito took care to speak in the same glib manner as always.

By doing so, he managed to slowly but surely regain his lost composure. Eventually, he succeeded in shaking away the scene that had burned itself into his eyes.

My grieving isn't gonna make things any better. We've gotta hurry, for Izabella's sake, too.

"...Hmph, 'Tis time to cut the idle chatter. Let us be off in earnest. There's no shortage of information we need to drag out of the Butcher, whether he gives it freely or not. And time is of the essence."

Her words hinted at the possibility of torture. Elisabeth licked her scarlet lips, and Kaito quietly dashed after her.

They all ran out of the chamber. Groan-like noises echoed throughout the labyrinthine basement as they hurriedly made their way through it and on up the stairs to the first floor.

It was at that point that the Kaiser, who'd been dutifully accompanying them, paused. He raised his head high and sniffed at the air. Then, after shaking his head a few times, he let out a bored scoff.

"...Hmph, I thought as much. Already, eh?"

"What's the matter, Kaiser?"

"You can't tell, boy? I should think it's a smell that you, too, would be familiar with."

"Familiar...?!"

Then Kaito finally realized what was different. The rusty aroma of blood was wafting down the first-floor corridor. After sniffing at their surroundings some more, the Kaiser approached something hidden in one of the walls' shadows.

When he realized what it was, a shock ran through Kaito. The Kaiser's nose was right up against a large pool of blood. The supreme hound then poked at something dark sitting in the middle of the sea of red.

"This in particular. Its odor is like that of a demi-human, yet more mixed. What do you think, O unworthy master of mine? Surely you recognize it."

The Kaiser let out a satisfied laugh, his expression hinting at ominous things to

come. Kaito silently knelt down beside him. When he saw what his hound was pawing at, his face went white.

Resting half-submerged in the pool of blood was a scrap of tattered black cloth.

“...The Butcher.”

“Kaito, Hina, to my bedroom! Investigate the status of the Gibbet! Jeanne and Deus Ex Machina, go search elsewhere! You two are better at covering ground!”

“I have no objections, miss. **We are at least twice as fast as you punks, after all.**”

“Oh my, precious daughter of mine. Ignoring me?”

“You and the Kaiser, go search as well! And before that, the both of you need to muster up some determination! Especially you, Vlad, you deadbeat! You seem quite content to just sit there and do nothing!”

Vlad peevishly pouted upon receiving his orders and insults in the same breath. Like always, his expression was creepily innocent. He stroked his chin and crossed his long legs in the air.

“Hmm, given that you all are the ones who killed me, I’d say I’m contributing more than my share. Also, given that I’m quite literally dead, perhaps ‘deadbeat’ isn’t the kindest insult you could have chosen... Oh, I see—you’re choosing to turn a deaf ear to my complaints. Ah well, I suppose I can help you out with your investigation.”

Nobody present was paying any heed to his grievances; they’d all set off. Protest written across his face, Vlad floated on after Jeanne. The Kaiser, on the other hand, seemed to think it was none of his concern. He snorted, then vanished. Separating from the others, Kaito’s group made for the stairs to the second floor.

Kaito, Hina, and Elisabeth hurried through the oppressive cliff-top castle. Their footsteps echoed through the hall. Right before reaching the stairs, though, the three of them stopped in their tracks.

“...’Tis his handiwork, no doubt.”

“Yeah...”

Before them stood a blood-soaked suit of armor. It resembled the moving suits of armor installed throughout the castle, but just barely peering out from beneath the rusty bloodstains on its chest was a white lily coat of arms.

Elisabeth let out a murmur, her voice tinged with pity.

“Hello, transfigured paladin.”

“Uorrrgh, uorrr... Gah, graaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah... Blagh, blegh, blargh—”

Kaito and the others hadn’t done anything yet. But in spite of that fact, the blood spurted forcefully from the openings in the paladin’s helmet. It would appear that all the blood staining his silver armor had come from his own mouth.

Upon catching a glimpse of the man’s eyes through his helmet’s eyeholes, Kaito gasped. The man’s left eye had ruptured, and a number of pink sacs were dangling from his neck and pulsating. It looked like some sort of strange, parasitic plant was growing off him. But the truth was even more revolting. The sacs were made up of the man’s own engorged flesh.

“Uorrr... Ah, ah, ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!”

With a shout, the paladin hoisted up his weapon. They normally used swords, but his had been replaced with a crude battle-ax. It looked far too heavy for a normal paladin to wield properly.

Before charging at them, the paladin held his battle-ax directly at Kaito and the other two. Even in his current state, he was still making sure to pay respect to his foes.

“...!”

Kaito involuntarily bit down on his lip. Normally, that was a gesture one would perform with a sword. Perhaps due to haziness stemming from his hunger for pain, the paladin firmly believed himself to be holding a sword. It was, in a word, pitiful.

“Master Kaito...”

“Yeah, he’s beyond help.”

Even if they left him alive, there was no way to save people who'd undergone transformations like that. Kaito raised his arm, and Hina readied her halberd. But a cold voice spoke first, scoffing at the fact that they'd faltered even for a second.

"Gavel."

GOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOONG!

A solemn, bell-like noise rang out. A mass of crimson flower petals scattered magnificently through the air.

A massive iron hammer swung down from empty space, the very air trembling as it fell. The transformed paladin was crushed, armor and all. The hammer's head was covered in brutal-looking thorns, causing it to resemble a meat tenderizer as it flattened the man from the head down.

An invisible hand lifted up the Gavel's short handle. An unsettling sticky noise accompanied it.

Crimson lines gently stretched up, then snapped. Beneath the hammer, iron plates and human flesh were all flattened into one. It made for a spectacle so far removed from the man's original form that the action seemed retroactively less cruel.

"Hmph."

Elisabeth snapped her fingers. The iron hammer transformed into a cloud of petals, then vanished. All that remained was a horrid, incomprehensible pile. It made a squelching sound as Elisabeth trampled it underfoot.

Ascending the stairs, she let out a low murmur.

"Hurry."

"...Got it."

She spoke but a single word, and Kaito's response was similarly concise. After stepping over the pitiful corpse spread out before the staircase, the three of them resumed running. On their way, they encountered two more transfigured paladins and dispatched them just as quickly.

Having disposed of everyone in their path, the three of them then dashed

through the corridor where high windows cast ominous designs on the floor.

Eventually, Elisabeth's bedroom came into view. Kaito felt a shiver go across his body as he ran. A terrible scene surely awaited them there, as the door was wide open and the floor around it was covered in blood.

"Butcher!"

"Mr. Butcher!"

As Kaito and Hina shouted, Elisabeth stepped wordlessly into the room.

What greeted them was an overwhelming silence.



It was quiet in the room. Quiet and still.

Ever since a demon had broken in, the window's slatted shutter had been left broken. A faint light streamed down onto the vacant floor. The spots where the plain yet refined bed and dresser had once been were now devoid of furniture. They'd gotten caught in Elisabeth's battle with the Butcher and destroyed.

The only thing left was the knife-ridden map on the wall. That and the tall, narrow metal cage hanging from the ceiling—the Gibbet, one of Elisabeth's summoned torture devices.

Kaito looked up at the iron cage in silence. It was empty. The Butcher was nowhere to be seen.

"Elisabeth..."

"...Hmm."

Elisabeth snapped her fingers. Its chain rattled, and the cage landed on the floor.

The first thing she did was deliberately inspect the cage door. Kaito watched her work from the side. After running her finger across the scratch marks left on the lock and confirming their direction and shape, she nodded.

"These marks came from within. It would seem the Butcher opened the cage on his own, then fled."

"You're saying that he wasn't removed by force? Could Mr. Butcher be all

right, then?”

“No, there’s no way... Something definitely went down after he broke out.”

Kaito turned to look back toward the bedroom’s entrance. Drops of blood were scattered about by the doorway. And not only were there grotesque paladins prowling the castle grounds, there had been a scrap of black cloth floating in the pool of blood back on the first floor.

There was no way the Butcher was unharmed. Elisabeth sighed, as though agreeing with Kaito’s fears.

“I can probably surmise what happened. After breaking out of the cage, he had the poor fortune of running into those paladins. They probably brought a fair number of men here with the intention of capturing me on my return from the underground tomb. There were doubtless priests among them to activate my shackles, to boot. After capturing the Butcher, though, they returned to their headquarters. That gives us our reason why none of the ones we faced were in any state to fight.”

Upon hearing Elisabeth’s hypothesis, Kaito nodded. It was true that all the paladins they’d encountered had already been half-dead. The assembled manpower had been too half-assed to conduct any sort of proper purge. It seemed likely that the only ones left behind were those who’d had a poor affinity for demon meat and were on the verge of death.

Even though they weren’t as sure of it as Jeanne, the Church was probably looking for the Apostle, too... So it makes sense that they took the Butcher back to their headquarters with them.

“You mean to say that Mr. Butcher has been captured? The Church is... Oh?”

“What’s wrong, Hina?”

“My beloved Master Kaito, my dear Lady Elisabeth, what might that be?”

Forgetting how worried she was, Hina sounded flabbergasted. Kaito and Elisabeth turned toward the direction she was pointing. Something had been placed in the room’s blind spot, arranged so that the Gibbet would draw one’s attention in its place.

Upon seeing it, the two of them squinted in unison.

“That’s...”

It had a preeminent presence to it, which made the fact that it had evaded their attention for so long even odder. Once they saw it the first time, though, it was thereafter impossible to ignore.

Sitting on the floor was a massive slab of bone-in meat. It was so impressive, it practically deserved fanfare.

“’Tis meat.”

“Yup, that’s meat.”

“It’s meat, isn’t it?”

Despite themselves, all three of them said the obvious. The paladins had sunken into madness, so it made sense that they’d overlooked it. But its very presence was such that Kaito and the others couldn’t help commenting on it.

The three of them cautiously approached the meat. The closer they looked, the odder its countenance seemed to be. Kaito and Elisabeth exchanged a glance, then started elbowing each other in the side.

“Go on, then, Kaito. You’re the one with the wife, so why don’t you show her how manly you are, eh?”

“Oh, no, no, I wouldn’t dream of denying the opportunity to check it out to my world-famous master in action.”

“Allow me, then. As your intrepid maid, I shall go forth and investigate the meat! I’m off!”

““No, no, no, no, no, no, no.””

Kaito and Elisabeth both reached out, determined not to foist the task off on Hina. By sheer coincidence, Elisabeth’s fingers reached it quicker. She tutted at Kaito as she hoisted up the meat.

Then something about the sensation of grabbing the bone gave her pause.

“Hmm? ’Tis...loose? Perhaps... Rrrrrrrrrrr, rah!”

“Yikes!”

With a loud *pop*, Elisabeth yanked the bone free from the meat. When she did, something fell out from within and clinked against the ground. She picked it up and held it in front of her eyes. It was a slab of metal, twisted into an intricate shape. Even though it was covered in grease, it still sparkled. After pondering its design, Elisabeth tilted her head to the side.

“Some kind of key, perhaps?”

“Yeah, and there’s something on the side, right? Look—there.”

Elisabeth turned the key over as Kaito had instructed. One of her eyebrows shot violently up.

The words *beloved dragon no. 2* were etched on its soiled metal surface.

“That’s...”

“Familiar words, indeed.”

Kaito and the others began whispering among themselves. Whatever it was, it probably had something to do with the dragons the Butcher kept. And keys were, by nature, designed to open things. As he considered those facts, Kaito remembered something else as well.

Oh yeah, Elisabeth knows where the Butcher lives.

Elisabeth had sent Hina on an errand there once, and on another occasion had brought golems and ice spirits there as a gift. The Butcher had many clients, albeit most of whom he’d probably picked for their lack of knowledge regarding the Apostle. Of them, though, the number who knew where he lived was likely quite small.

In fact, Elisabeth might well be the only one.

Elisabeth tossed the key in the air. Before it could fall, she snatched it back up.

“After we reconvene with Jeanne and the others, we’re heading for the teleportation circle. We make for the Butcher’s residence.”

“Got it.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Kaito and Hina nodded. Without another word, Kaito began pondering.

The Butcher had definitely left the key there on purpose. It was impossible to know whether his intentions had been benevolent or malicious. Even so, though, Kaito wanted to believe.

Maybe this will let us change something.

Kaito couldn't help but wish for it as he thought back on the Butcher and the pleased way in which he would tell his tall tales.



The Butcher's residence was home to no small share of danger. Specifically, it was in the deep heart of a vast, dark, remote forest. Nobody dared harvest its rare herbs and ores, and the closest human settlement was on the other side of a mountain. Thanks to that, the forest had been able to avoid human exploitation. As a consequence, monsters and man-eating plants thrived within its confines. It had long since become a place where no human dared tread.

However, everyone in their group had, in some sense, transcended humanity.

Kreeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee! Kree—

A strange noise erupted as a tangle of ivy made to take a bite out of Elisabeth's head, but she ripped it in two with her bare hands. Its death wail was a sound no plant should ever make. As she tossed the ivy aside, Elisabeth sighed.

"Hmm, none of them poses much threat, but they do make it unpleasant to walk. 'Twould have been far more convenient if we could have but leaped there directly."

"It's set up so that you can only teleport as far as the forest entrance. It was like that when I came here, as well."

"Huh. I wonder if the Butcher set it up that way in preparation for when we all found out his secret."

Kaito's voice was soft. "Nay, I suspect he merely wasn't thinking at all," groaned Elisabeth in reply. Beside them, Hina shouted, "Don't you dare get near them, you insolent lout!" at a poisonous moth as she bisected it down the

middle.

Leading the group was Deus Ex Machina, which had returned to being a steel titan and was currently trampling some howling plants underfoot. The chains on Jeanne's wrists jingled as she gracefully followed after it. Vlad gently drifted along behind.

They all marched in silence, the only noises the *gyaaahs* and *arrrghs* of their would-be hunters. Eventually, though, they reached a clearing and stopped.

A fancy hut towered before them. It was so impressive, it practically deserved fanfare.

".....It's a mushroom."

"It would appear to be a mushroom, yes."

"Aye, and a toadstool, at that."

"Hmm? Why, where is the meat? I must say, abandoning the sense of cohesion strikes me as a crime against aesthetics."

Kaito was aghast, Hina merely nodded, Elisabeth was exasperated, and Vlad leveled a characteristically obtuse complaint.

Erected before them was a completely round house. Its red roof was the very image of a mushroom's cap, and it was even mottled white. It was abundantly clear that the building was modeled after a mushroom—more specifically, a toadstool.

And at the bottom of the stalk was an adorable little round door.

Kaito grabbed its handle and pulled. However, the door refused to budge. It must have been locked. Elisabeth prompted him to move aside, then raised one of her shapely legs into the air and let out a casual shout.

"Hi-yah!"

"Welp, there she goes!"

Elisabeth had let loose a magnificently bold roundhouse kick. The door shattered. Inside, though, nothing seemed particularly amiss. While it was true that the massive chopping block, assorted knives, hand-operated saw, and

miscellaneous hooks made the house seem a good deal more dangerous than the average merchant's, given the vast array of meats the Butcher dealt in, it all fell within reasonable expectations. Suspecting that the room had more to hide, Kaito and the others got to work searching it.

Vlad alone stood motionless, still floating in the air. Kaito turned back to lodge a complaint.

"Vlad, c'mon. I know you can't touch stuff, but you could at least *try* to help out."

"I'm afraid I can't, my dear successor. I'm rather preoccupied, you see, trying to figure out why the area around these shelves is the only place free of dust."

"...Huh."

"I see. I guess the dead guy ain't a deadbeat after all."

Vlad smiled, and Jeanne called Deus Ex Machina over. It moved the shelves aside with great ease. A secret door was installed beneath them. When they opened it, they discovered a staircase leading underground.

Nerves on edge, the group descended. At the bottom, they discovered what had once been an underground lake now being used as a storehouse.

A vast number of stone sheds were lined up atop the parched earth. Despite their master's absence, golems and ice spirits were diligently managing the meat within.

There was nothing strange about that, either. And there certainly didn't appear to be anything related to the Saint in there.

It feels like the nasty stuff we learned was all just a bad dream or something.

As doubts started creeping through Kaito's mind, though, Hina started waving her hand about and shouting.

"Master Kaitooo! There's another set of stairs leading up over here!"

Apparently, she'd found a different set of stairs than the ones they'd come down on. But given that they hadn't found anything so far, the group's expectations as they ascended were low. Upon opening the wooden door at the top, they saw dim light flooding forth.

Kaito popped his head out through the doorway. They were surrounded by trees. It was probably a backyard of some sort.

“Hey, over there!”

Then amid the dazzling light and vivid shades of green, Kaito spotted it.



“Ahhhhhhh! Ahhhhhhhh! Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhh! I’m gonna faaall!”

“Don’t worry, Master Kaito! I have your hand firmly in my grasp! Even if every gear in my body should stop, I will never let you go! Or would it be better if we simply traded places?”

“Nope, that’s a no-go! If we think about it rationally, I’m just as likely to fall from up there, so it works out better for both of us for you to keep supporting me like this, but that doesn’t change the fact that it’s scary as shiiiiiiiit!”

“Seeing you so scared is so heartrendingly cuuuuuuuuuute!”

A strange shout erupted from Hina. They’d been in so many nerve-racking situations recently, she must have finally snapped. As she swayed and squirmed, Kaito’s legs were left practically floating in midair.

Furthermore, the two thin black wings beside him were flapping fiercely through the air. Each time they did, Kaito had to expend mana to maintain his stamina and avoid getting sent flying.

Below him, the forest spread out in every direction. The trees behind him vanished in a sea of green as they receded into the distance.

Currently, Kaito and the others were riding atop a majestic red dragon.

Upon leaving the Butcher’s house behind them, they’d taken to the skies.

It had all started a few hours prior. When they’d entered the Butcher’s backyard, they’d been met by three dragons. The first was the steel dragon that had previously brought Hina to the Capital. The second had been a female with four wings and a long, slender crimson body. According to Jeanne, it was called a “red dragon.”

The moment they’d used their key to unlock her collar, she’d begun violently flapping her wings.

They hadn't been afforded a moment of hesitation. Jeanne, who seemed to have expected this development, had elegantly mounted the dragon's saddle. Elisabeth followed after and reclined atop the dragon's back. And bringing up the rear had been Hina, who'd grabbed the startled Kaito by the arm and jumped on board last.

Naturally, a red dragon's body was tapered at the rear. In other words, there was basically nowhere viable to sit near her backside. As a result, Kaito had been wailing the entire time since.

An exasperated shout came from Elisabeth, near the front.

"Enough of your whining, Kaito! You're immortal! Even if you do fall, you're sure to survive!"

"Hell no, I'm not falling for that! I know full well that enough blood loss will make my soul fade away! I'm freaking out over here, and the bumpiness isn't helping!"



“Your grumbling really is getting irritating, mister. **Why don’t you make like a corpse and shut the hell up.**”

“You’re sitting in the saddle; you’re in no position to talk!”

Kaito put forth no shortage of effort in making his objections known. Jeanne’s honey-blond locks fluttered in the air as she feigned ignorance.

Deus Ex Machina was no longer by her side. It was ill-equipped for long flights, so she’d temporarily dismissed it. Vlad, who was floating beside Kaito, gave a light chuckle.

“Well, well, well, my dear successor, it seems that you’re growing accustomed to the skies. And isn’t that what’s really important here?”

“Shut up! ...But I, uh, I guess it’s not *as* bad anymore...”

Still trembling, Kaito caught a glimpse of the ground below.

The forest looked like a vast, vibrant green swath. Beastfolk, demi-human, human—it was impossible to tell whose territory they were above. Looking down on it from the sky, he felt land-ownership rights seemed almost petty and irrelevant.

The red dragon’s body weaved back and forth as she continued her flight. It was unclear where their destination was, but she clearly seemed to have one in mind. Her speed was steady, and she showed no signs of being lost.

Then the landscape below them started to change. The forest came to an end and was replaced by a series of houses and buildings that looked as small as toys. Then they, too, were replaced with a sandy yellow desert. As he gazed off into the distance, Kaito felt his breath catch in his throat.

Far away, he could make out a vast body of water, sparkling as radiantly as though it had fragments of glass sprinkled atop it.

“You’ve gotta be kidding. We’re gonna cross the ocean?”

“At this rate, it seems she intends to leave the very continent.”

Elisabeth sat up. Her voice carried an understandable hint of tension to it.

At some point, the air had taken on a different quality. It had previously been

dry and parched but was now rife with moisture and the smell of the sea.

The ocean was approaching faster than they could blink. Then the red dragon soared over the glittering sea.

A gust of conspicuously fishy wind lapped at their cheeks. A flock of seabirds let out alarmed cries, then flew off. A line of white sailboats ran atop the waves.

At that point, the sun started sinking beneath the horizon line. The waters burned a vivid red.

The light was the shade of ripe fruit, and it scorched its way into Kaito's retinas. The majesty and splendor of it all took hold of his eyes and soul. It was a landscape he'd never gotten the chance to see in the closed-off life he'd lived before.

Anxious as he was as to the nature of the red dragon's destination, an uncharacteristic surge of excitement ran through him.

Riding a dragon through the skies, huh... Man, just look at how far I've come!

"Hmm. I'll admit to not knowing why I know, my dear successor, but I think I have an inkling of where this dragon is heading."

"W-wait, for real, Vlad? Then where—? Ahhhh!"

Upon hearing Vlad's assertion, Kaito had turned his head to one side in earnest.

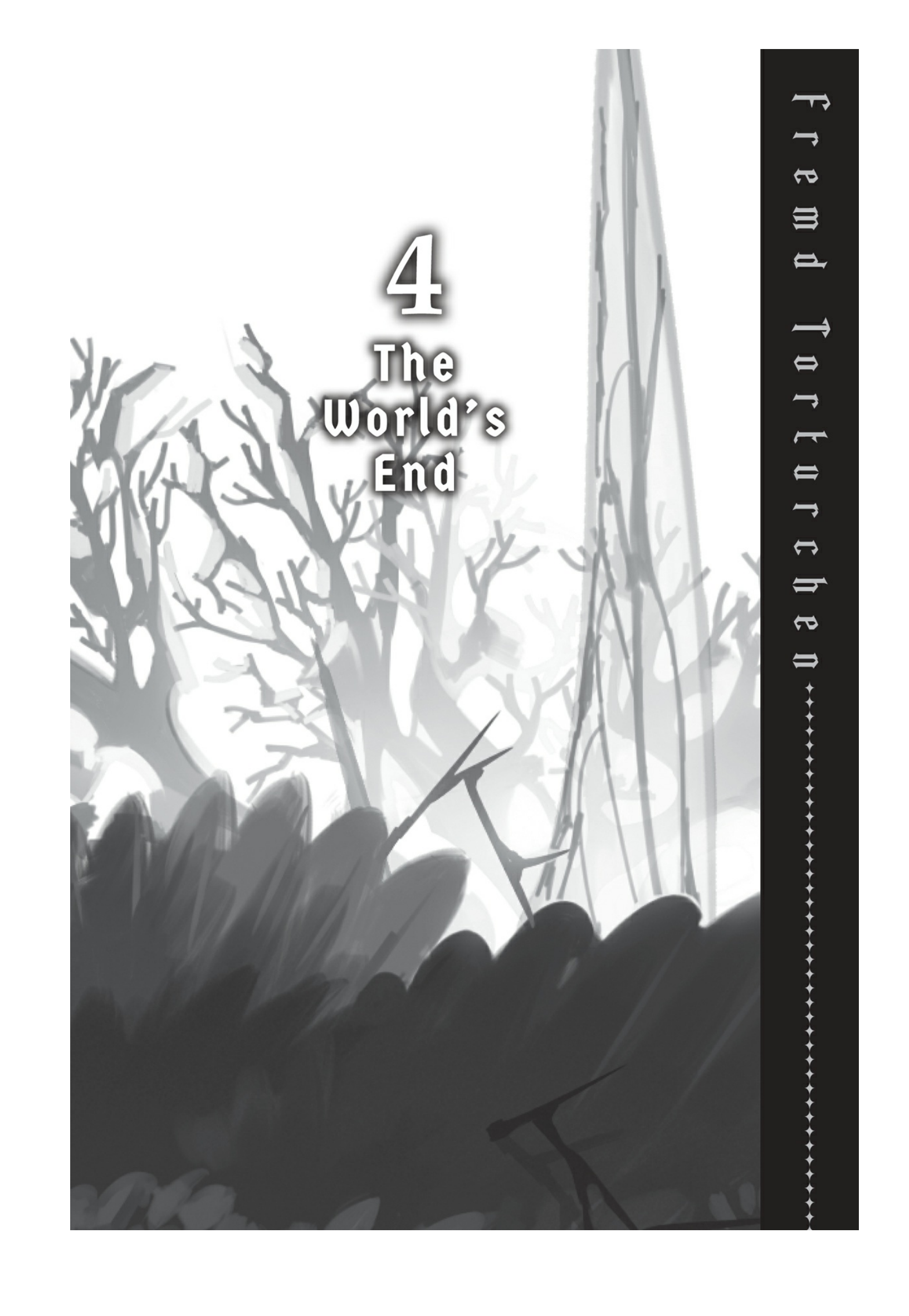
The moment he had, though, the red dragon had charged headfirst into a cloud. His sight stolen away from him, Kaito let out another yelp, at which an emotional voice called out, "Master Kaito, you're so cuuuuute!" Beyond the pale white of the cloud, Vlad quietly murmured his response.

"The World's End, in all likelihood."

At that moment, Kaito recalled something he'd once heard.

It's a nonsensical little fairy tale, and one that's gone on for a very, very long time.

Having first gotten atop a red dragon's back, it would appear that they were now heading to a land straight out of a story.



4 The World's End

F r e m d T o r l o r c h e n

4

The World's End

Someone once said that the world has no end. The world is round, they proclaimed, and as such it has no terminus.

Someone once said that the world has an end. It's like a waterfall, they proclaimed, one that swallows up anything and everything.

Someone once said that the world has an end. For God created that place, they proclaimed, and designated it "the World's End."

Was the world, in fact, round? Were the seas all connected? Or was there nothing but a waterfall at the edge and an abyss that swallowed up anything and everything? To this very day, the truth is yet unknown.

After all, nobody ever actually undertook the voyage to find out for themselves. Even so, though, one of the three proclamations can currently be held up as definitely true. For in this world, there is a location that God designated as its End. It's said to be a pure place, one crafted from snow and water, wind and mana.

And it's a place that only those granted knowledge of its location were able to reach.

"'Even if one were to walk the whole earth over,' it's said. Being a mage, I'd of course heard of it, but to think that while I live and breathe... Well, no, I suppose I'm dead now. Either way, I never dreamed I'd actually be able to reach it! Yet, now I stand with my own two feet...or to be more precise, I should say I float! But in any case, it's quite moving."

"That's a lot of corrections you're making there. Are you quite all right?"

"Ha-ha-ha, as satisfied as satisfied can be!"

Leisurely shrugging off his beloved daughter's cold stare, Vlad gave a hearty

laugh.

With grace befitting his noble bearing, Vlad cast a sweeping gaze over the snowscape before them. The ground was frozen and hard, and no amount of digging would turn up soil. The entire region was made of mana-rich ice. Because of that, everything as far as the eye could see was blue and faintly glowing. The snowflakes were big enough to make out their individual shapes, and they piled up everywhere like little handicrafts. Above them, the sky was milky and white. Strangely, it was also covered in an oil-like rainbow sheen, although that didn't appear to belong to clouds, the sun, or the stars.

The sky was simply empty. It was like a giant lid was sitting over their heads. Consequently, it was difficult to tell whether it was night or day. In a sense, it resembled the demons' world. However, the sky wasn't sullied like it had been back there. The wind was frighteningly clean and pure, and the atmosphere was sparkling.

It was beautiful, almost miraculously so. But at the same time, there was nothing there.

There was just absolute emptiness.

It was like a hollow vessel, with all the desolate solitude of everything having ended and the faint hope that something new would begin.

It was a place truly deserving of the name "the World's End."

And in that legendary land, Kaito Sena was currently freezing to death.



"I'm s-so c-cold! Cold, cold, cold, cold, c-c-c-c-cold!"

"Please, Master Kaito, pull yourself together! Oh, if only my surface area were a hundred times larger!"

"Hmm, I feel as though I just saw a vision of Kaito being fatally crushed."

Despite being wrapped in Hina's tight embrace, Kaito was shivering.

For the last little while, Hina had been laudably trying to warm him up with her own body. Just as she'd said, though, she lacked the surface area to cover him completely. Other than his face, which was buried in her opulent chest,

Kaito was suffering an utter defeat at the hands of the cold. As she gazed at his frozen visage, Elisabeth nodded.

“’Tis true, though. The temperature is such that no human would withstand it unprepared.”

“The World’s End is a place of purity. In other words, **this ain’t no place for respectable creatures to try survivin’.**”

“H-h-how the hell are you two not cold in those r-r-ridiculous getups?!”

Kaito couldn’t stop himself from crying out. Elisabeth and Jeanne, in stark defiance of what they’d just said, seemed to be perfectly fine.

Vlad was a phantasm, and Hina was an automaton. It made sense for the two of them not to feel the cold. But the fact that Elisabeth and Jeanne seemed unaffected as well made no sense.

After all, the amount of fabric comprising the Torture Princess’s bondage dresses barely even rose to the level of “sparse.”

Jeanne appeared dumbfounded by Kaito’s exclamation. She shrugged her exposed shoulders.

“Allow me to pose you a question, mister. Why should any mage complain about the cold in a land as rich in mana as this? **What, you think you classify as ‘respectable’?! You’re like some sorta masochist perv who owns clothes but walks around naked anyway!**”

“’Tis just as Jeanne says. Using your mana better would serve you well. Are you ready? Hold the sensation of a lit fire within the pit of your stomach. Then form a layer of warmth in the air around... Wait, no. Stop. You were just on the verge of immolation, no?”

“Y-y-yeah, that’s right, I a-a-almost caught on fire! I’m bad at that f-f-fiddly magic stuff, okay, and I’m cold!”

As smoke sputtered from the top of his head, Kaito continued shivering.

Then Vlad returned, seemingly having grown bored of observing the scenery. He shook his head in exasperation.

“I take it you intend to secede, then, my dear successor? It’s a pitiful way to

die, to be certain, but it is what it is. Partings are always sudden and always sorrowful. As comical of a farewell as it is, perhaps that, too, lends it deeper significance."

"Listen here, you. When I die, I'm smashing your stupid jewel on my way out if it's the last thing I do."

Kaito leveled a glare at Vlad through his shivers. It was unclear what he found so funny, but Vlad responded with a chipper laugh.

Exasperated as she was, Elisabeth gave Kaito a firm clap on the shoulder.

"Calm down, now. I daresay you're at no risk of *actually* freezing to death."

"I—I—I mean, you're r-r-right, but I feel like it'd still be a problem if I s-s-stopped being able to move."

Elisabeth did have a point. Kaito's soul was currently housed inside a homunculus.

As long as he didn't unintentionally undergo severe blood loss, his body was immortal. In fact, if he were a normal human, he would have already succumbed to hypothermia and died. But if Elisabeth's blood running through his veins was to freeze, so would his motor functions. And given their current situation, he wasn't particularly keen on asking someone to lug him around as a paperweight.

Hina clenched her fists in determination. Her face full of resolve, she grabbed at her maid uniform.

"Now I understand! Now that it's come to this, we only have one option left! As his bride, I will take extreme, extreme pleasure in removing my clothes and pressing myself against my precious husband to better warm him up!"

"Settle yourself down, Hina. 'Tis true that you replicate a human's body heat despite being an automaton. But stripping and clinging to him will change little. Also, do try to hide your ulterior motives a bit more thoroughly. Promise me that, if nothing else... In any case, the red dragon seems to have stopped moving. We have nothing to use as a guide, and Kaito is on the verge of freezing."

“I d-d-don’t like where this is g-g-going.”

“The matter now becomes, ‘what to do?’”

Elisabeth crossed her arms and *hmm*ed. Then she snapped her gaze to the side.

The red dragon was lying on its belly there, seemingly unaffected by the cold. Ever since they’d arrived at the World’s End, she’d suddenly stopped moving. She was instead dozing off, as though she’d come home for the first time in a long while.

Upon hearing what Elisabeth had to say, Jeanne shrugged again.

“A good question. Leaving the pathetic mister to freeze to death won’t exactly do us any good. Nevertheless, walking about randomly would be foolish. We need to avoid wasting our stamina. Our best option is to await good news from my children. If things go well, it will give us a direction for our next course of action, as well. **And if they don’t, well, we can just give up and let him die.**”

“D-d-damn, that’s harsh.”

Kaito lamented, his face pale. However, he didn’t have any specific objections to Jeanne’s proposal.

After Deus Ex Machina had rematerialized, it had split up and begun scouting. In accordance with Jeanne’s orders, its four parts had gone out to search the vast untrodden land. Waiting for the four to return was the best option they had available to them.

After all, there’s basically nothing to use as a landmark here. If we started walking, odds are we’d just end up going in circles. Given that the Butcher invited us here, there should be something we can reach before we freeze to death, but...

Despite his racing thoughts, Kaito chose to put his trust in the four machines. In other words, the only thing there was to do was wait.

They spent the next little while in silence.

Sandwiched between the luminescent sky and earth, even Kaito’s sense of the passage of time evaporated. Given the fact that he was able to successfully put

up with it, the time he spent waiting couldn't have been more than a few minutes, but to him it felt like an eternity.

Then, with a start, he looked up. He could hear the crunching sound of something scraping at the frozen earth.

A distorted mass of silver approached from the distance, chipping lightly away at the ice as it moved. Bandersnatch, the beast made from nothing but fangs, had returned. It bored holes in the ice as it came to a quick stop.

Sitting in front of its master with its feet all lined up together, Bandersnatch let its mouth click open and shut. Apparently, it was using the rattling of its fangs to somehow give its report. Jeanne responded with a theatrical little gesture and covered her mouth with her hand.

"My, my, this falls outside my expectations."

"Wh-wh-wh-what is it, Jeanne? D-d-d-did something happen?"

"I'll praise you for having the grit to ask your question despite your teeth shivering to their roots, mister, if nothing else. Listen and be awed. Bandersnatch found a soldier encampment down the way. **Who'da thunk that someone'd beat us to the World's End? Barely even feels real.**"

"What? The Church's goons, then? They must have dragged something out of the Butcher."

"That isn't it. The flag they're flying isn't the Church's. I recognize the design, but...describing it would be difficult. Draw it, if you would."

Bandersnatch nodded obediently at Jeanne's order. With unhesitating motions, it set its bladed legs to work. It looked something akin to a machine outputting image data. Silver whooshed through the air, carving a delicate, flowing pattern in the ground.

The first things it drew were animals. Then flowers. Eventually, the drawing of a white deer, an ancient wolf, and a colossal hawk all wreathed in an extravagant ring of flowers was complete. Kaito's eyes went wide. Momentarily forgetting about the cold, he let out a dumbfounded whisper.

"The Forest King and the other two... And wait, the flowers in the crest vary

by member of the royal family, and that one is specific to...”

“Yes, Master Kaito, I remember it, too.”

Still nestled beside him, Hina gave an obedient nod. Elisabeth narrowed her eyes in confusion.

His tone serious, Kaito stated the flag’s owner.

“It belongs to the private army of Vyade Ula Forstlast, the Forest King’s third imperial princess.”



With that, a new mystery arose. After all, Kaito and the others were currently at the World’s End.

Without being told exactly where it was, it was impossible to even reach.

So why are the beastfolk here? And what’s their goal?

No matter how hard he racked his brain, though, Kaito couldn’t come up with answers. He didn’t even have enough information to come up with a reasonable guess.

He scrunched up his face. Elisabeth responded by crossing her arms and puffing out her chest.

“When thinking fails, all that’s left is to act. And one way or another, we need to figure out the beastfolk’s reason and objective in coming to the World’s End.”

“Indeed. We can hardly chalk it up to happenstance. Which leaves us no choice but to find out why.”

“Yeah...you two are right. Guess we should get moving, then.”

Jeanne interjected in the affirmative, and Kaito nodded as well. Odds were that the beastfolk weren’t their enemies. Kaito didn’t think of them as enemies, at any rate, and he chose to believe that they’d feel the same way.

And with that, their course of action was set.

They were going to head to the beastfolk campsite and make contact with them.

Without further delay, they followed Bandersnatch and set off.

As they walked, they trampled snowflakes underfoot. But just after they got going, a serious problem reared its head.

“E-E-Elisabeth, this isn’t g-g-good.”

“What isn’t? Ah. I think I have the gist of it, but go on and say it anyway.”

“A-a-at this rate, I’m gonna die. Or r-r-rather, freeze stiff.”

“Hmm. I’m afraid I don’t really see the issue. We can merely simmer you in hot water later, I should think.”

“Wh-wh-whaddaya think I am, f-f-frozen peas? I don’t wanna be a s-s-statue.”

As they were talking, Kaito’s body heat was mercilessly fading away. For a moment, the insane thought of burrowing into the Kaiser’s fur passed through his mind. After all, the one part of his body that wasn’t cold was his left arm, which had been transformed into that of a beast. If he clung to the Kaiser’s canine pelt, he was sure it would warm him up. But the Kaiser was a proud demon. Rubbing his soft fur would no doubt incite his rage. And for that matter, Kaito wasn’t sure if demons even *had* body heat.

All right, brain, back it up. Let’s try to avoid getting ourselves bitten in half.

Narrowly coming back to his senses, Kaito began trying to think of a more realistic solution.

The plan he ended up going with was trying to get magical tutelage from Elisabeth again.

No matter how many times he tried, though, success eluded him.

“...N-n-no dice, huh?”

“Hmm. How else to go about teaching you, I wonder?”

Having already tried out a number of different explanations, Elisabeth tapped a finger against her forehead. Thin beads of smoke were coming up from Kaito’s head. Elisabeth frowned as she gazed at his sorry demeanor.

“The problem seems to lie in the fact that thermoregulation magic doesn’t use pain as its fulcrum. To you, that makes the sensation comparatively hard to

grasp. Even so, though, I'm at something of a loss as to how else to explain it."

"D-d-don't give up now; you've g-g-got my life in your hands."

"Worry not. I've all but dropped it already."

"H-h-how the hell's that s-s-supposed to make me feel better?"

"It's okay, Master Kaito! Even if you can't move anymore, I will make sure to dutifully carry you!"

"Hmm, transporting cargo under our present circumstances seems rather hazardous. Blast it, though! How can it be that a man who birthed a sword on his own strength has so impoverished an imagination?! One. More. Time. First, you—"

"May I, my precious daughter?"

"I'm sorry, does the charcoal briquette with delusions of grandeur have something to say?"

"Ha-ha-ha, as rebellious as always. Worry not, though; I'm a forgiving man."

Vlad's interruption was met with Elisabeth's unconcealed scorn. However, he just laughed off her snide comment. He found his face riddled with stakes in reply, but he carried on undiscouraged.

"The reason your teachings are so ineffective is because they're designed with a sane pupil in mind. If you want to teach him, then you'd best rethink your methods from the ground up... Now then, my dear successor, I want you to release fire and ice within your body at the same time. Don't try to grasp the sensations. Actually release them. And put enough strength into both of them to kill yourself."

"Wait, Vlad, are you mad? I mean, I'm well aware that you're mad, but that's —"

"Each one will offset the other. But of the two, your talent with fire is greater, and the difference should be precisely enough to warm your body."

Kaito followed Vlad's instructions and closed his eyes. He focused his mind, then tried burning up and freezing his innards. His mana immediately started flowing freely, as though all the lack of response up until then was but a distant

memory.

Oh man, this is way nicer.

The two contradictory energies were clashing within Kaito's body. It wasn't without a degree of pain, but neither was able to fully take form without being quashed by the other. At the end, the only lasting effect was his body temperature successfully rising.

Kaito slowly opened his eyes. He then turned to Vlad, who was beaming triumphantly, and nodded.

"Yeah, the cold's manageable now. Thanks, Vlad."

"Y-you little... Do something about that irreconcilably twisted nature of yooooooooours!"

Elisabeth evoked the image of a cat with its hairs standing on end as she screamed. As she did, she leveled a splendid roundhouse kick at Kaito's back.

The attack itself was, by all means, no different than his usual treatment. Their location, on the other hand, was anything but usual.

As a result, the impact of the kick caused Kaito to lose his footing and slip.

"Wh—?"

"Oh?"

The frozen ground was all but devoid of friction. And to compound on Kaito's misfortune, the ground had begun gently sloping up at some point. Without realizing it, they'd climbed up a little white hill.

One can imagine, then, what happened to Kaito when he slipped.

His black long coat acting as a sled, he began sliding down the hill at an alarming rate.

"Ahhhhhhhhh, Elisabeeeeeeeeeeeth!"

"Kaitooooooooooooooooooooo!"

"My beloved Master Kaitooooooooooooooooooooo!"

"Hmm. I seem to have lost my precious successor."

“I don’t know if he was really all *that* precious.”

While the remaining members clamored among themselves, Kaito continued accelerating with no signs of stopping. He frantically thrust his beastly arm into the ground. However, he was unsuccessful in driving his claws into the ice.

So, uh, what exactly am I supposed to do now?

Although he wasn’t exactly being driven by negative emotions, the absurdity of the situation served to calm him just as effectively. Kaito narrowed his eyes and cast a glance over his surroundings. When he did, he realized something.

There were strange furrows in the ground right next to where he was sliding. The snowflakes had been carved up, and the ice had been shaved away. In all likelihood, this was where Bandersnatch had slid down the hill.

“Well, it looks like I’m headed in the right direction, so...I guess this is fine?”

After all, Kaito’s pace had been the slowest among the group. Deciding that continuing to slide was just fine by him, he stopped resisting. Of course, that said, it wasn’t like he had any way to stop. Growing slightly desperate, Kaito crossed his arms.

Maintaining that posture, he continued sliding away.

Eventually, the ground became flat again. Despite that, though, Kaito’s speed showed no signs of abating. He merely continued rushing along the ground beneath the milky-white sky. Then, suddenly, he got caught on something and came to a stop.

“Hmm? What’s that?”

Kaito squinted. It felt as though he’d been caught by countless pairs of transparent hands.

He then reached out and checked to see what it was that had actually stopped him. It turned out to be a fat bundle of wire-thin plants. Each one of the snow-white vines was covered in fuzzy, bur-shaped blossoms.

Narrowing his eyes once more, Kaito surveyed his surroundings. The ivy stretched out around the entire environs.

He tried giving the vine a tug. The more he pulled it back, though, the more it

stretched. It didn't look like it was going to snap, nor was there any end to it in sight. It was far longer and sturdier than he'd expected.

What's a plant doing here, though? I thought stuff wasn't supposed to be able to live here. What's going on, then? And did Bandersnatch manage to avoid this stuff?

Faced with the plant's contradictory existence, he cocked his head to the side and double-checked the shaving in the ice. Bandersnatch's tracks stopped just before the ivy, then reappeared on the other side with deep holes at the very beginning. It must have noticed the ivy just before running into it, then jumped to avoid it. Kaito, on the other hand, hadn't had such luck. Crossing his arms again, he tilted his head back to the side.

"What's up with this ivy, then? I mean, there are definitely things that come to mind when I think *plants*, but..."

"I came to see who was caught, but this? To think that a human would make it to the World's End. It would appear we were not the only ones *invited*... Who are you? State your name!"

"Huh?"

Suddenly, he heard a deep voice addressing him. Kaito's eyes went wide. But the animosity present in the other party's voice wasn't what he was reacting to. The expression flooding his face wasn't one of tension and alertness but one of shocked familiarity.

"...No way."

He knew that voice. Flustered, he cast a glance at his surroundings.

It was then that he realized there was a group behind him leveling swords at his back. The approaching soldiers were all clad in vermilion armor. Its scale-and-leather aesthetic gave the same unique impression as always. In addition to their breastplates, though, they were also wearing thick winter coats. The coats had likely been made from the fur of their comrades, as that was their people's custom. Just as Kaito had expected, masculine, inhuman faces peeked out from within their heavy hoods.

At the front of the group was a beastman with copper fur and a wolf's head.

And the subordinates standing behind him looked familiar as well.

Kaito somehow managed to avoid slipping as he stood up. Then, making no efforts to defend himself, he called out to the wolf-headed beastman.

“Lute!”

“Hmm? Why do you know my...? Wait, you’re—!”

Lute, the commanding officer of the first squad of Vyade Ula Forstlast’s private army, stopped dead in his tracks.

At that point, Kaito finally came to a realization. The reason the plants hadn’t withered away in this frozen world was because the beastfolk had brought them there. They must have been using them in place of a fence to keep out intruders. What beastfolk lacked in magical prowess they made up for in their peculiar brand of engineering. Armor and magical tools made from the corpses of their comrades and plants that could grow inside buildings without any soil were just a few examples. It made total sense for them to have developed breeds of plants that were resilient to the cold.

At any rate, Kaito found it a great relief that the beastfolk he’d run into had been people he knew. He opened his mouth, about to casually ask them how they were doing. At the last moment, though, he swallowed his words.

No, no, no, no, no... This isn’t some situation where I can just stroll up and say, long time no see.

This was the first time Lute had seen him after Jeanne had forcibly taken him away. And ever since then, the situation had gone completely pear-shaped. The relationship diagram of the people Kaito was involved with had grown more tangled by the minute.

And above all else, they were currently standing at the World’s End.

Under normal circumstances, people couldn’t even reach it without being told its precise location.

And I don’t have any idea what Lute and his men are doing here.

Depending on what their objective was, they could very well perceive Kaito as an enemy. And even if they didn’t, the way he’d just suddenly appeared was

suspicious in the extreme. Having their reunion take place due to him getting caught in their guard netting could hardly be regarded as desirable.

Kaito clutched his head. He could feel a headache coming on.

Man, why couldn't we have reunited under some easier-to-explain circumstances? —Wait, hwah!

“Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha! Sir Kaito, you're alive!”

All Kaito's concerns were blown away in an instant. A hearty smile spread across Lute's face as he unhesitatingly wrapped Kaito up in an embrace, his thick, burly arms holding Kaito firmly in place. Perhaps getting slightly carried away, Lute swung Kaito from side to side as he spoke in a tone full of heartfelt delight.

“You're alive, you're alive, thank goodness you're alive! Oh, could there even be a more joyous reunion?! How wonderful it is that you survived! Look, everyone, it's Sir Kaito! He's alive!”

Lute set Kaito down and gave him an affectionate thump on the back. Feeling woozy, Kaito pitched forward, nearly toppling to the ground. As he did, Lute's subordinates surged toward him.

One after another, they thrust their oafish, gloved hands into his and shook.

“We missed you! Captain Lute is right; it's wonderful to see you alive.”

“You look well. That's good to see.”

“We were all so worried about you.”

“Oh, uh, thanks, you too, nice to see you all.”

Thoroughly flummoxed, Kaito did his best to respond to his overly enthusiastic welcome. While he did, though, another part of his brain coldly analyzed each beastperson's reaction. However, much to his surprise, not a single one of them cast so much as a doubtful glance his way.

Wait, seriously? Should they really be welcoming me so openly?

Kaito was taken somewhat aback. At the same time, however, he felt a strong feeling wash over him.

Lute had once told him that beastfolk took much more pride in repaying debts than humans did.

It would seem that he hadn't been lying.



The words of celebration eventually died down, and all the hands were successfully shaken. The mood was amiable and calm. "Very good, very good." Lute nodded in satisfaction. At long last, though, he cocked his head in puzzlement.

"Hmm? But, Sir Kaito, whatever are you doing at the World's End?"

"Wait, don't tell me you only just started wondering that."

"And for that matter, whatever became of you after you were taken away by that eerie golden girl?"

Lute's questions were starting to come out in force. Kaito nodded. In the midst of the storm of greetings and handshakes, he'd been hard at work trying to straighten out all the information in his head. He opened his mouth, prepared to begin explaining the particulars.

"Okay, Lute. You gotta promise not to get too freaked out. Right after that, I —"

It was at that moment that the crunching sound of ice being shaved away began growing audible from afar.

The timing was atrocious. *Oh, shit*, thought Kaito as he spun to look behind himself. But he was already too late.

New colors were visible atop the snow-white hill. The silver, black, and gold were especially eye-catching.

Leading the group was a twisted silver machine. Right behind it was a young woman wearing a risqué bondage dress running alongside a maid, and floating a ways behind them was a man dressed like an aristocrat. And dashing along calmly directly beside him was a young lady wearing a white bondage dress comprised of little more than just belts.

When you see them from a distance, they look kinda weird, don't they?

“Kaitoooooooo! Are you okaaaaaaaaaay? I was a bit careless back there—I’ll admit to that! Having you die on me like this would haunt not just my dreams but my waking hours as well!”

“Master Kaitoooooooooooooooo, are you all riiiiiiiiight? You’re okay, riiiiiiight?! If you aren’t, I’ll be sure to follow right afterrrrrrrrrrrrr!”

“Good heavens, what a troublesome man he is. **Sheesh, it’s a miracle he managed to get himself a wife.**”

“I find myself agreeing, but hold on a minute... A wife? Now that I think about it, did my dear successor swear an eternal oath with that automaton I made? Boasting of loving a doll is an absurdity among absurdities, but I suppose the same could be said of a human partner as well. Love is pleasant enough as a temporary indulgence, but it’s far too insubstantial a delusion to spend one’s whole life bound to. Human or doll, that fact remains unchanged. But that’s not the important part. That doll is a creation of mine, which means...that in a sense, he’s become my son-in-law both in name and in substance?”

The group’s ramblings were just as self-indulgent as always. There was no background noise to interrupt them, so their voices traveled well. Kaito especially wanted to declare his staunch objection to Vlad’s assertion. But now wasn’t the time for that.

Oh, shit.

The beastman’s eyes had come to a stop on the girl in the questionable white bondage dress—the golden Torture Princess with honey-blond locks and sparkling gold adornments, Jeanne de Rais. Their tails were jutting out from their coats, and they all puffed up in unison. The beastfolk grabbed for their weapons and went on high alert.

Elisabeth noticed their change in demeanor and came to an abrupt stop. Her expression turned grave, and she reached out and snagged Hina by the collar. Hina responded by kicking and squirming, wanting nothing more than to dash over to Kaito’s side.

“What are you doing, Lady Elisabeth? Master Kaito is right there in front of us, Lady Elisabeth. All I have to do to be with my beloved husband is walk straight forward, Lady Elisabeth!”

“Calm yourself. Look around him. He’s surrounded by beastfolk, but... I see. He must have gotten himself caught on the guard netting they’re wont to place around their campsites. Little matter, that, though... Although it seems we arrived a tad too early to join up with them and a tad too late.”

With only a glance, Elisabeth had read the situation like a book.

Back in the underground tomb, Kaito had told Elisabeth all about what had happened when he was on the run. In other words, she knew about the grave injuries the golden Torture Princess had inflicted on Lute and his men when she’d whisked Kaito away from the beastfolk lands. Jeanne herself, on the other hand, seemed utterly nonchalant about the whole situation.

Jeanne de Rais is the oppressor of slaves, the saint, the whore...and the self-proclaimed maiden of salvation.

According to Jeanne, salvation could be obtained only by human deeds. And she was haughtier than both God and Diablo. She probably didn’t even harbor a shred of guilt toward those she’d sacrificed with noble intentions.

As though to provide proof of that, Jeanne turned to the beastfolk and began casually tossing cruelties their way.

“Oh, why, it’s been some time. You seem to be in better health than I expected. How nice. **Y’all are a bunch of sturdy old pups.**”

“Positions!”

Lute shouted, his voice tinged with rage. The sounds of swords being drawn could be heard, one after another in succession. Bows stretched to their limits.

Dammit, they’re practically at each other’s throats already. If a fight breaks out, all this will have been for nothing!

Kaito immediately realized that he was going to have to be the one to stop them. Leaping out in front of the beastfolk, he spread his arms wide.

“Wait, hold up! Jeanne might not make any sense, and she might be a total asshole, but she’s not your enemy!”

“I feel as though I’m being mocked. **Not that I’m disputing the charges, mind you!**”

“Have you gone mad, Sir Kaito?! Why would you protect the monster who mercilessly wounded and cruelly slaughtered our people...? Curses, she must have brainwashed you! Or perhaps you were accomplices from the start... I truly don't want to believe that, but...”

Lute ignored Jeanne's comical interjection as he ground his fangs. Kaito gave a silent thanks for Lute's rationality. If he hadn't hesitated just then, arrows would already be flying.

Now, how should he go about breaking the deadlock? Kaito frantically racked his brain.

In the end, he decided to hit the beastfolk with the most appropriate card he had.

“The golden girl...Jeanne de Rais didn't slaughter the people in those villages!”

“What did you just say?”

Lute was visibly shocked, just like Kaito had expected. He breathed a sigh of relief. The beastfolk were proper soldiers; they cared more about their people who had fallen victim than about the wounds they themselves had suffered.

He could take that to mean he'd been successful in buying them another chance to discuss things over and explain themselves.

In order to give both himself and the beastfolk a chance to calm down, he took his time laying out his next few points.

“Would you mind hearing me out? Right now, she and I are working together. And it's to prevent the killer you guys are looking for from achieving their ultimate goal. If it's okay with you, Lute, I wanna give you a proper explanation of everything that's happened. Do you have somewhere we could sit down and talk?”

Kaito already knew that the beastfolk had set up camp, but he decided to feign ignorance. However, the response he got was lethargic. Lute's subordinates seemed unsure as well.

Looks like they need another push. C'mon, think. How much information can I safely give out?

The terrible truths he'd come to learn floated through his mind one after another. Each and every one of them was like a bomb with the power to shake human society to its foundations. If he let them slip carelessly, he could very well end up bringing about an international incident. Despite the fact that he was short on time, he considered his options as carefully as he could.

I really want to be able to see eye to eye with Lute and his men here.

They had no idea what was waiting at the World's End. Given that the Butcher had brought them there, it had to be something important, but they were critically short on preparation and manpower. They didn't even have a home base to speak of.

We need to get the beastfolk to work with us. Because most importantly, if we lose Lute, we lose our connection to Vyade Ula Forstlast.

Kaito and the others were trying to face off against the Church, a massive, influential organization. It was vital that they get someone powerful to back them up, and there was no guarantee that they'd have another chance to negotiate with the beastfolk. At worst, the world might even be destroyed before then.

I don't want to start a war between them and the humans. But right now, I need to maintain my relationship with the beastfolk.

Kaito clenched his fists. Steeling his resolve, he opened his mouth.

Then he threw down one of the most crucial cards available to him.

As far as humanity was concerned, it was a perilous card indeed.

"There's something I want to tell you, something the Church has been working to conceal."

That one sentence was more than sufficient to insinuate the Church's involvement with the beastfolk murders.

Lute's ears twitched beneath his hood. As they did, he stared straight at Kaito and studied his expression.

Kaito responded to Lute's piercing gold gaze with silence. The shoe was on the other foot now. This time, Kaito was the one concealing information and

asking for help. And he was well aware of how self-serving he was being.

But what we're trying to do ends up being in Lute's best interest, too.

Kaito's conviction stemmed from his desire to stop the world from ending. Thanks to that, he was able to avoid looking away.

The two of them stared at each other, the way they had when they'd first met.

Eventually, Lute closed his eyes for a moment before reopening them. Having made some sort of decision, he raised his arm straight out to the side.

Kaito's shoulders twitched. However, he made no motions to flee, nor did he ready himself to defend or counterattack. Staring fixedly at him as he did, Lute abruptly turned his palm down.

All at once, his subordinates lowered their swords and bows. They relaxed their postures.

Kaito let out a sigh of relief. The tension in his body had faded away so rapidly, in fact, that his knees began to awkwardly give way. As he looked at Kaito, Lute narrowed his eyes. Then he placed his palm atop his vermilion breastplate.

As he did, he spoke in a respectful tone.

"I suppose this marks the second time, then, that we extend an invitation to the enemy of mankind."



Bright red flames crackled up within the stone-enclosed hearth.

In a sense, seeing light and heat in that closed-off world of ice and snow was practically moving.

On top of the fire was a pot filled with scooped-up snow. After slowly melting, the clumps had transformed into shockingly pure water. Hina was hard at work shredding flower petals and pouring them in. The water boiled, and as it changed to a vibrant shade of orange, she scooped the petals back up before they could go tart. Then she replaced them with some diced-up dried fruit. Beside her, a gray wolf beastman was setting out bowls.

As the preparation of the tea steadily advanced, Lute, Kaito, and Elisabeth sat down in a circle.

They were currently resting, having made their way to one of the portable dwellings of the beastfolk's campsite.

The inside of the ceiling above their heads was supported by an umbrellalike frame. Comprised of wood and beastfolk hides, the hut had been prepared in advance so that it could be set up by anyone. After the planks that made up its round floor had been laid out, they'd been covered twice over with rugs woven from various types of fur. According to Elisabeth, they'd been made from the pelts of powerful mages, and the patterns woven within served to ward off the cold.

Given all the measures they'd taken, the inside of the hut was surprisingly warm.

With no need to worry about the cold, Kaito and the others sat cross-legged as they talked.

"After that, we went back to Elisabeth's castle for a bit. But the Butcher had already been..."

As he relayed his story to Lute, Kaito cast a number of furtive glances to the side.

Jeanne was sitting in the corner hugging her knees under the watchful eyes of several guards. Her hip adornments interfered with her ability to sit, so she'd done away with them, but as a result, she was practically naked from the waist down. If they hadn't been beastfolk, her guards would have likely been at a loss for where to look. Originally, the plan had been for her to be confined to a different room altogether. But with just a few words, Jeanne herself had gotten that plan amended.

*"If confining me in name alone will satisfy you, then do as you wish. **But if a couple of nobodies guarding me will put your minds at ease, then you're all a bunch of dumb shits. Looks like living till old age just ain't in the cards for ya.**"*

Her words had evoked no small amount of displeasure from the beastfolk. On the other hand, she did have a point.

Locking her up would accomplish little. It took a thief to catch a thief, and it took a Torture Princess to stand up to a Torture Princess. Even so, they didn't want to upset the beastfolk any more than they already had.

Having been given strict instructions by everyone to say nothing, Jeanne was currently sitting in silence. Next, Kaito had dispelled Vlad's phantasm and thought back to the complaint Vlad had lodged.

"Hold on now, my dear successor. Lumping me in with her and getting rid of me as well is rather unjust, no? Respect might not be either of our strong suits, but we are different people, I'll have you know. Hmm? 'Did you forget all that you said back in the beastfolk village?' Good heavens, is a man forbidden from enjoying a smart remark now and again? But very well. I am a dead man, after all; being forgotten about seems appropriate enough."

Now that I think about it, was he being sarcastic back then? Eh, whatever.

Kaito then turned his focus back to the exposition he was giving to Lute.

At long last, the story reached the point where they'd arrived at the World's End.

"...And so basically, we ended up flying here."

"I...see. I must admit, it all seems rather implausible."

Apparently at a loss for words, Lute stroked his chin. He had just gotten a huge amount of information dumped in his lap.

Kaito could certainly appreciate his bewilderment. After all, the entire story felt almost surreal.

If I hadn't lived through it myself, I probably wouldn't believe it right away, either.

After receiving Elisabeth's approval, he'd gone ahead and told Lute almost everything.

Even while he was talking, he felt like he'd been spinning some sort of tall tale. Despite that, though, he unfalteringly laid out the truth. The one thing he did make sure to do, though, was stress the fact that the culprits behind the beastfolk killings were only a group of fanatics within the Church who'd taken

advantage of the chaos of Godd Deos's death to run wild, and that their wishes ran contrary to those of humanity as a whole. Furthermore, he added, he felt that they should be treated like demons and their contractors and viewed as enemies of the entire world.

If the beastfolk see that as an "act committed by humanity" and decide to retaliate, then even avoiding the world's restructuring won't be enough to stop the world from falling into an age of darkness. Both sides would suffer tremendous casualties.

Lute had avoided giving Kaito a firm answer to his request. Given his position, doing so made perfect sense. Even if he knew who the killers were, the choice of how to retaliate wasn't Lute's to make. Everything lay on the shoulders of Vyade and whichever other members of the imperial family to whom she chose to disclose the information.

Vyade's the Wise Wolf. She holds harmony in high regard, and she desires peace for her people.

Kaito chose to believe that she wouldn't start a war in retaliation. Before him, he could see Lute's face growing more sullen by the minute. He looked as though he'd just bitten into a piece of meat that not even his beastfolk fangs could tear.

"The first demon slumbering in the royal underground tomb, the truth about the Saint, the Apostle yet living... It's like something out of a myth or a fairy tale."

"Man, tell me about it."

"If not for the land on which I heard it, I'd have written it off as idle fancy."

"If not for where you heard it, huh...? So you believe me?"

"It would seem I have little choice. You see, Sir Kaito, the way we arrived here, at the World's End, was given to us abruptly and by a mysterious individual."

Suddenly, Kaito recalled what Lute had said back when he'd been caught on the ivy that had served as guard netting. Even though he'd been astonished at the unexpected reunion, he'd heard Lute's words loud and clear.

Back then, Lute said...

“To think that a human would make it to the World’s End. It would appear we were not the only ones invited...”

“You said you guys were ‘invited,’ right?”

“Precisely. It would probably be faster to show you the object itself. Have a look.”

Lute withdrew a piece of paper from the sack on his back. Kaito took it, then stared at it intently. Elisabeth, who was right next to him, peered at it as well. They scrunched up their brows in unison.

“This is...”

“...Aye.”

Complex magical runes were piled up along the left side of the paper. Together, they made up a formula designed to interfere with a teleportation circle. Even Kaito, who was generally ignorant when it came to magical matters, could tell how abnormally chaotic they were.

It reminded Kaito of the letter the Governor had once given them.

Back then, the formula dissolved, paper and all, after a single use.

This paper, on the other hand, had survived even after Lute and his men had teleported. Frightened by its incomprehensible construction as he was, he turned his gaze to the paper’s right side. A few words were written on it in a round scrawl.

The beginning, the middle, and the end all lie in the palm of His hand.

If you wish to reject those words, make for the World’s End.

The right shall be granted to all races impartially.

The invitation was almost reminiscent of a poem. The artwork at the end, though, stood out like a sore thumb.

A massive piece of bone-in meat was drawn on the paper. It was so impressive, it practically deserved fanfare.

“...Aye, the Butcher wrote this.”

“Yup, definitely the Butcher.”

“You can tell from so little information? Consider me impressed.”

Lute’s words rang with frank admiration. In truth, Kaito had come to that conclusion off the bone-in-meat drawing alone, but some things were better left unsaid. His expression turned meek as he handed the paper back to Lute.

After glancing over its contents again, Lute frowned.

“The first time I saw it, it seemed like some manner of practical joke. But it was impossible to write off as such, as the circumstances under which it was delivered were far too peculiar.”

Apparently, the letter had been delivered to Vyade’s third villa.

Ever since Jeanne’s invasion, Vyade had changed residences and fortified her defenses. But someone managed to not only find where she’d moved but also slip past the guard netting and invade her bedchambers.

The culprit had been a small dragon. After leaving the letter on Vyade’s pillow, he’d flapped his way out.

Afterward, one of the few beastfolk mages had immediately gotten to work analyzing the formula written on the letter. What they’d discovered was that there was an unknown set of coordinates recorded within it.

However, there were still many members of Vyade’s private army who had yet to recover from the wounds Jeanne had dealt to them.

Because of that, she’d chosen Lute, who was naturally resilient and deeply loyal, and put him and his subordinates through a round of intensive healing. While that was going on, she’d also sent out scouts to the designated location and had them bring back reports.

Then, armed with their newfound information, the squad had prepared themselves for the environment and set off.

Upon reaching the site themselves, Lute and his men had come to realize just where it was that they’d come to. Beastfolk held little piety toward God and the Saint, but even they were versed in their legends.

In this world, there exists a place that God designated as its End. A pure place,

crafted from snow and water, wind and mana. A place that only those granted knowledge of its location are able to reach.

“Given everything you just told me, Sir Kaito, it follows that the first half of the letter—‘The beginning, the middle, and the end all lie in the palm of His hand. If you wish to reject those words, make for the World’s End’—refers to preventing the world from being restructured. But what is this ‘right’ it says will be granted? Why, it’s not even clear what the letter’s writer would have us do in order to attain it.”

“Yeah, it really isn’t... What does the Butcher want with all the races anyway?”

“In truth, we were at a loss for what to do after we finished setting up camp and laying out the netting. With only the letter at our disposal, we couldn’t make heads or tails of things.”

Lute scratched his head. Apparently, the arrival of Kaito’s group had been a great help to him as well. For a moment, the conversation came to a lull. Kaito and Lute crossed their arms, and Elisabeth immersed herself in thought. Silence filled the room. Then a bright voice piped up.

“Thank you all for waiting—it’s ready! Go on and drink it while it’s still hot!”

Hina was nearly prancing as she began passing out tea. Her smile was, to borrow an idiom from Kaito’s old world, like a breath of fresh air. Kaito and Lute thanked her as they received their bowls.

Kaito took a sip from his. It was as sweet as honey, and it had a fruity tanginess mixed in as well. Elisabeth, on the other hand, sat unmoving, her bowl remaining perched in her hand. Eventually, she let out a quiet murmur.

“‘The beginning, the middle, and the end all lie in the palm of His hand. If you wish to reject those words, make for the World’s End. The right shall be granted to all races impartially.’ Given that he used the phrase ‘all races,’ we can assume that, while their coordinates are unknown to us, the demi-humans must have received his invitation as well. And rejecting the notion that everything from the beginning to the end lies in God’s hand, eh?”

“What do you think it means?”

“In all likelihood, something exists here that would serve to hinder God’s restructuring of the world.”

It sounded like Elisabeth already knew what that was. Kaito’s eyes widened. The surprise of that realization almost caused him to drop his bowl. The moment before its contents spilled, though, Hina grabbed it from beside him.

“Are you all right? Not a single drop spilled on your leg, my dearest Master Kaito, did it?”

“Huh? Oh yeah, no, I’m fine. Thanks. Sorry about that.”

Kaito’s thanks was decidedly absentminded. Reflexively, he cast a glance toward Jeanne. The golden girl was as expressionless as always, but the corners of her mouth were ever so slightly curled up. She nodded, affirming his suspicions. Elisabeth went on, her voice low.

“’Tis but one thing I could imagine it to be.”

“Yeah, same.”

Kaito offered a brief agreement. But he left the role of saying it aloud to Elisabeth.

Lute leaned forward in anticipation. Elisabeth reverently opened her mouth to speak.

“Here lies—”

“Why, indeed, our revered Saint is here.”

A sweet, bell-like voice rang out.

Who the soft interjection belonged to, nobody there knew.



At some point, a petite individual clad in scarlet cloth from head to toe had taken a seat beside Kaito.

The long garment reached all the way to the floor, spreading out wide like a carpet of rose petals. Half-hidden within its folds, she was also wearing a gold-hemmed vestment of the same color. She looked to be affiliated with the Church.

The most surprising bit, though, was what lay beneath the clothes.

Their sudden intruder was a young girl. She looked to be less than ten.

She had simple flaxen hair and marvelously clear eyes the color of amber. Her short, evenly cut hair paired well with her attractively proportionate facial features. Her appearance was more than sufficient to classify her as cute. But there was just something about her.

There's something...catastrophically broken about her.

No matter how you looked at her, she was nothing more than a sweet, simple little girl. But Kaito couldn't dispel the strange impression he was getting from her. And the fact that she'd appeared out of nowhere without catching anyone's attention served as proof that she wasn't just anyone.

Due to the intrusion of a single young girl, the air in the room was stretched thin and tense.

Lute and his men reached for their swords. However, their opponent was simply too young to cut down or cross-examine. Hesitation welled up in their eyes. Hina alone assumed a battle-ready stance as she swiftly moved to protect Kaito. Jeanne merely blinked.

Still cross-legged, Elisabeth planted her chin atop her hands. Then she spoke, making no effort to hide her displeasure.

"As I suspect. And that's why you're here, I suppose."

"Yes, exactly. Lovely to see you again, Elisabeth Le Fanu. I remember the last time we met, you know. You may have known my name, but you didn't have the faintest clue as to the gravity of the role I play. You've matured quite splendidly, O ignorant sheep. I can hardly make light of you after you've come this far."

The girl chuckled, clearly amused. Elisabeth's brow furrowed even further. Kaito cocked his head to the side. It would appear that the two knew each other, although their relationship seemed anything but cordial.

Who is this girl? What is she?

Kaito opened his mouth, about to give voice to those questions.

Before he could, though, Elisabeth continued, spitting out her words with a look of utmost resentment plastered across her face.

“Is it really fine for you to be out of the Capital like this, Grave Keeper?”



5
The
Grave
Keeper's
Zealotry

F r e m d T o r l o r c h e n

The Grave Keeper's Zealotry

"Oh, no, it isn't fine at all. It's super not-fine. But we all have to do what we have to do. I serve at the pleasure of God and the Holy Mother. The tomb's seal is broken, and the end is nigh. Soon, the living and the dead will both return to ash. We'll be just fine leaving a handful of men to protect those worthless old kingly corpses, thank you very much. Besides, I had another part I needed to play."

The girl's voice was as smooth as silk. Abruptly, she stood up.

Her long scarlet cloak fluttered, and she continued her speech in an operatic tone.

"I may be the Grave Keeper, but I am also the Messenger. I am the one who blows the horn at the end of days, loudly hailing the sheep—'behold, for she is awakened, and rejoice, for the devout have been granted a miracle.'"

Kaito squinted. Her speech was strangely verbose. Considering that she was a member of the Church and a fanatic, to boot, the actual contents of her speech themselves were fairly normal. But the fact that they were coming from someone who looked to be a ten-year-old girl was anything but. The most pressing issue, though, was how she'd addressed herself.

"...The Grave Keeper?"

Kaito thought back to the horrors he'd seen in the underground tomb.

Living people had had their pain harvested for pacification down in the cruel nursery. And the room's gatekeeper had been a monster created by taking a divine creature, feeding it demon meat, and mixing in human parts.

The Grave Keeper had been the one responsible for all that.

As a result, Kaito had come to believe that the Grave Keeper lacked anything

resembling morals or basic rationality. But the girl standing before him seemed entirely sane. That fact sent a shiver down Kaito's spine.

You mean that the person who created that stuff, who was able to create all that stuff, knew full well what she was doing?

Kaito had assumed they had been the deeds of someone consumed by madness, but this notion was dozens of times more horrifying.

Then a sharp noise sliced through the air.

Kaito frantically looked up. When he did, he saw the tip of Lute's sword resting on the Grave Keeper's forehead from where he'd swung it. It looked capable of splitting her head open at any moment. However, the only response the Grave Keeper gave was a few blinks. When he spoke, Lute's voice was full of loathing.

"Just what business does the rotting flesh of the Church have with us?"

"I'm rather disappointed. You seemed so magnanimous, yet your actions are most deplorable. Have you perhaps forgotten about the third peace treaty? Normally, we would not be so lenient toward pagans such as yourselves. But the beastfolk are not our people, nor are they even human. So the Church overlooks your sins and strives constantly to be good neighbors to you. Ah, but alas! Alas, you repay me with violence!"

"Don't take me for a fool, girl!"

Lute howled. The pelts that made up the portable dwelling's walls shook from the vibrations.

Kaito swallowed and looked back at Lute's sword. Fortunately, it hadn't broken the Grave Keeper's skin yet. In an impressive display of rationality, Lute had carefully maintained the sword's position.

"We know all about what you did to our people, how you slaughtered them! Our people place much higher pride in repaying debts than humans do! That, and because a friend of mine put in a good word for you, I have no desire to decry humanity as evil! But betrayal must be repaid with fangs! If you are the Grave Keeper, then you will not leave this place alive!"

“...Wherefore?”

“Wh—?”

“What right hath the likes of the third imperial princess’s private army to bellow at me?”

Her voice had a terrifyingly calm ring to it. She focused her clear, hollow gaze on Lute.

Upon seeing her apparent transformation, Kaito let a breath catch in his throat. Elisabeth gave a light scoff. Lute, like Kaito, had shock spread across his face.

The Grave Keeper continued her diatribe dispassionately in a strangely old-fashioned tone.

“Thou hast no right to take such a tone with me. What evidence doth thou hast of such killings? Didst thou misconstrue the testimony of a demon’s contractor and the Torture Princess as valid, perchance? Thou showest thy naïveté, knave.”

“You would treat me as a child?!”

“As such befits an immature mutt as thyself. A lesson, perhaps, for thee. If thou wishest to turn thy sword on the Grave Keeper, *do come up with a better excuse*. Vyade would surely do as such.”

“What do you know of Lady Vyade Ula Forstlast?!”

“Will it require an order ere thou understand? What an insufferable simpleton. Now, stand down.”

“Grrr—”

“Stand down, I did say!”

When Lute heard the Grave Keeper’s arrogant tone, his face contorted. His hands trembled in humiliation. A scratch appeared on the Grave Keeper’s forehead, and blood began to drip forth. Wholly unperturbed by that fact, she began speaking in another tone altogether.

“Well, if you really wanna take my head...then go on—go for it! Seeing one of

the three kings have to take responsibility? Now, *that* sounds like a good time! And hey, don't worry! The restructuring will be a grand repentance, a rite of absolute destruction where all sins get forgiven! Watching our races carve each other up in the meantime sounds like a blast! Everyone's gonna die anyway, so hey, memento mori!"

This time, she spoke like a young punk, and an energetic smile spread across her face. Kaito was astounded all over again.

What the hell is wrong with her?

The Grave Keeper's speech patterns were abnormal, and in a different way than Jeanne's. Hers were incongruous, as though several different people were all mixed together.

The tip of Lute's sword shook a little. The trail of blood had dripped all the way down to the Grave Keeper's lips. In spite of that, though, her smile remained the same. Grinding his teeth, Lute raised his sword overhead.

"Hrgh!"

"Lute, no!"

Kaito called out to stop him. Killing the Grave Keeper could easily have drastic consequences. Instead of stopping, though, Lute returned his sword to its sheath. Then he collapsed cross-legged onto the pelt floor.

Kaito breathed a sigh of relief. The Grave Keeper sloppily licked at her blood. After cleaning the area around her mouth in the same manner a cat would, she spoke.

"Ah, how lovely. And the Church is quite magnanimous toward its neighbors. We will overlook your discourtesy this time."

Man, there's gotta be a limit to how shameless you can be.

Kaito frowned. Lute grimaced as well, but he looked around the room, seemingly having returned to his senses. His subordinates had been directing murderous rage toward the Grave Keeper as well. Even now, they still seemed poised to spring forward and go for her throat. Lute took a deep breath.

Then, having stiffened his resolve, he bowed to the Grave Keeper.

“I thank you for your generosity.”

His subordinates ground their teeth in unison. Their commanding officer had apologized, and they couldn't let that apology go to waste. They forcibly choked back their rage. But Lute then continued, his voice practically a growl.

“But make certain you do not forget. This is the World's End, a land that belongs to no race. If we all seek the same thing, then conflict is inevitable. And the battlefield is a place of many surprises. You may be influential, but I can make no guarantees for your safety. So take care. Remember, *any old blackguard* might fire the arrow that takes your head.”

“Oh yes, I've been aware of that for quite a long while. Why, *I've seen it myself*. That's simply the kind of place that a battlefield is. Anyone and everyone might find themselves among the ranks of the fallen. The dead will form circles and dance among the skulls, waiting patiently atop God's palm for the day when all returns to nothing. Such tranquility, such delight! But we are not yet on a battlefield, and I am but a simple messenger.”

The Grave Keeper gently laid her hand atop her chest.

Then, at long last, she displayed an innocent, age-appropriate smile.

“Now, let's have a chat! Let's talk peacefully and pastorally so that all God's creatures can come to an understanding.”



“Have a...chat?”

Kaito let out a dumbfounded murmur. The Grave Keeper's proposal seemed completely reasonable. But that was what made it seem so completely and utterly surreal. After all, their two camps were working under diametrically opposed goals and beliefs.

Jeanne, Kaito, and the others were trying to protect and preserve the world as it was. That was the salvation they were trying to attain.

The Grave Keeper and the rest of the fanatics, on the other hand, were trying to bring about the world's restructuring. That was the salvation they were trying to attain.

Most conflicts had some sort of common ground the two sides could agree on. But here, no such thing existed.

There was no way for them to meet halfway. The chasm that lay between them was vast and deep.

Given the situation, then, what could there be to talk about?

“‘Twould be meaningless. And surely you know that, Grave Keeper. Exchanging words would amount to naught but a waste of time.”

“Oh my, you state that so assertively. It saddens my heart, it does.”

“You lot endorse the restructuring, and we seek survival. The world will either perish or not perish. The two options leave no room for compromise, which presents us with a rare instance of pure, unadulterated opposition.”

Elisabeth gave voice to the same thoughts that had been going through Kaito’s head.

Still languidly resting her chin atop her palms and crossed legs, she bluntly continued.

“Mutual understanding is impossible for us. One or the other shall have to die.”

“Oh my, I should hope not. We at least have room to talk things over. Elisabeth Le Fanu, you especially should have little reason to want the world to continue.”

The Grave Keeper smiled. Elisabeth sullenly arched an eyebrow.

Kaito immediately picked up on what the Grave Keeper was trying to say.

Elisabeth’s going to be burned at the stake. So it shouldn’t really matter to her whether or not the world goes on... But wait. If we manage to prevent the world from being restructured and show everyone how corrupt the Church is, could we maybe get her sentence reduced?

It was the first time that Kaito had considered that possibility. But the Grave Keeper wasn’t finished yet.

“Let us assume for a moment that the restructuring fails to occur and that you

are all successful in borrowing Vyade Ula Forstlast's wisdom and denounce the Church. A purge would take place within it, to be certain. And Godd Deos's equilibrium sect would rise to power once more. Even so, the first demon's existence would still be hidden from the public, and the truth would be concealed once more. Why, I would bet on it. You all would choose to remain silent, and Vyade would, as well."

Elisabeth offered no response to the Grave Keeper's bold declaration. Although he was about to vehemently object, Kaito ultimately held his tongue.

The Grave Keeper was right.

She's right... I won't say anything. And Elisabeth's probably the same.

After all, what would happen if he talked?

If he publicly announced the existence of the first demon, the world would descend into chaos. Destroying the very foundation of one of the world's most prominent religions tended to have that effect. The Church, its followers, some of the aristocrats, and even the royal family would become the subjects of intense hate and distrust. History would be marked by an age of executions and torture.

The will of the masses could transform into a ruthless killing machine. Who knows just how many would hang?

Furthermore, the war against the demons had dealt a grave blow to the world's economy. If society lost their leaders as well, it would plunge into an unprecedented state of disorder. And if a famine or plague hit, the disaster would be inconceivable.

It was all too easy to imagine. Which left them with but a single choice.

They couldn't say anything.

"In short, even if your actions allow the world to persist, no grand accolades await you. For you yourselves will be the ones covering it up. Which all comes to mean that Torture Princess's fate will be unchanged."

If we made some sort of backroom deal with the Church... No, that wouldn't work. Elisabeth herself doesn't want amnesty, and the masses would call

relentlessly for the Torture Princess's head.

The sheep would come to a stop right before plunging into the flames. But then, unknowingly, they would burn their own savior to death.

Kaito clenched his fists. If that was the case, then the issue became which end was more honorable: the world's restructuring or burning at the stake.

"As I said but moments ago, the restructuring will be a grand repentance. When the end arrives, all your sins will be forgiven. The time has come to 'pray that God will be your salvation.' Doesn't that sound pleasant? It's a more beautiful end than burning to death, at any rate. The Lord will finally reward you for your efforts."

The Grave Keeper smiled, as though giving Elisabeth her blessings. As she did, Kaito was assailed by a particular doubt.

True, the Torture Princess is a grand sinner. But...

The masses had no clue how much good she'd done, nor did they even try to learn. That was simply the kind of creatures they were. They listened only to what they wanted to hear and saw only what they wanted to see.

Flocks of sheep were, fundamentally, stupid. And that was the way things ought to be.

...But isn't that a sin in and of itself?

The ignorant had no right to cast blame, did they? Their entire way of life was fundamentally wrong, wasn't it? Then didn't that make the restructuring just a way to rectify that?

"Is that what you think? Then you're an imbecile."

A razor-sharp voice forcefully smashed through Kaito's reverie. With a start, he came back to his senses.

Before him, Elisabeth still sat with her chin in her hands.

"Your premise is flawed, to start. The masses were not the ones who decided to cast judgment on me. 'Twas I. And grand accolades are the furthest thing from my mind. Your restructuring may well be more pleasant for me, but I care naught. In fact, 'tis quite the opposite."

Elisabeth's gaze bored down on the Grave Keeper. Her black nails glinted as she whispered.

"Any who say my sins can be forgiven shall die by my hands. 'Tis all there is to it."

Elisabeth ran her tongue over her red lips. Then, with a sweet smile, the peerless sinner continued.

"Your cajolery has backfired on you, Grave Keeper. Your death shall come swiftly."

That's right. Elisabeth is strong.

Kaito had just been forcibly reminded of that fact. Her resolve came completely from within. He had yet to come to terms with that, nor did he fully accept it. But the way she refused to fear death was definitely admirable. Now that he thought about it rationally, Kaito, too, was opposed to the restructuring.

He certainly didn't want Elisabeth to burn at the stake. But he saw no reason to endorse a plan that involved everyone in the world dying, either. Calling death "salvation" was nothing but base sophistry.

At the same time, Kaito realized something odd. The Grave Keeper's description was mad from its *very premise*.

Most of the people who want the restructuring to happen believe that the pious faithful will remain in the new world.

At least, that was what he'd thought. But the Grave Keeper was different.

The whole time, she'd clearly been working under the assumption that *all* humanity would perish.

"What...the hell?"

Words of doubt spilled forth from Kaito's lips. The Grave Keeper cocked her head to the side, curious as to what he was trying to say.

As he looked back at the young girl, the words practically leaped from Kaito's mouth.

"You...you *know* that the restructuring is gonna kill everyone?"

“Oh no, not everyone. Our revered Saint will surely remain.”

“Still—you know? But then...how the hell could you endorse that?”

Kaito gave voice to his genuine doubts. Believing that their piety would ultimately be rewarded with a miracle and would grant them survival was at least something he could comprehend. And as twisted as it was, looking for validation of one’s devoutness and righteousness made logical sense as a desire.

But if they knew full well that they, too, would be reduced to nothing...

That kind of devotion is just too empty.

That would mean that all their wishes and prayers had been for nothing. Not a single thing they asked of God would end up meaning a thing. Not a single person would be saved.

“Wouldn’t that just make everything meaningless?”

“Why should we seek results from prayer?”

Her voice had a strange, dry ring to it.

Kaito’s eyes went wide. Ignoring his shock, the young girl made a firm declaration.

“That would be blasphemy.”

Kaito had nothing to follow up with. He had no idea what to say. But then, suddenly, a smile spread across the Grave Keeper’s face. To his surprise, her voice took on a gentler tone.

“Ah, I see. It rather makes sense that a man from another world would have difficulty understanding. We know full well of the truth behind our world, you see. That is why we believe. God and the Saint have been seeking this restructuring for many ages. With that being the case, then our annihilation, too, is a thing of joy.”

“What the hell do you—?”

“If God deems our existence a mistake, then that is what is just and proper.”

The Grave Keeper’s voice was solemn. She spoke calmly, as though

proselytizing to an ignorant sheep.

“The next world will be God’s kingdom, a perfect, ideal land. And oh, what a marvelous thing that will be. Now is the time for us to repay the Saint for the love she so freely gave us. ‘All glory to God.’ ‘The miracle is upon us.’ *‘There is no need for us here.’ That* is what it means to have faith.”

Kaito shuddered. The hair on Lute’s tail stood up.

Now Kaito finally realized.

So she’s one of the “shepherds who would gladly cast themselves into the fire just to catch a glimpse of a miracle” Jeanne was talking about.

At the same time, he ruminated on what Izabella had said: that the Church’s doctrine was necessary.

“Even now, I still hold that the Church’s teachings are wonderful. Using faith as a way to support a life lived nobly and properly is an honorable thing. People are weak. They need something to believe in.”

This girl wasn’t using faith to support herself. *She was using herself to support faith.* She didn’t even believe that her prayers would reach anyone. She sought nothing from God.

And if she was told to die, she would simply die. *That* was the nature of her love.

Kaito parted his trembling lips. Still shaking, he asked his question.

“How can you even *think* like that? You’re so young, but you’re—”

“Enough from you, Kaito. Asking such a thing of the Grave Keeper is nigh comical. Now you’re the one with the flawed premise.”

Sounding annoyed, Elisabeth interjected. She gestured rudely toward the Grave Keeper with her chin.

When she spoke of the adorable young girl she was pointing at, her voice was tinged with loathing.

“The Grave Keeper inherits the memories and personality of every Grave Keeper before them. However, the rite of succession is too great a burden for a

baby's mind to bear. As a result, the personalities blend together, and a kind of natural selection occurs. In the end, all that remains is a single common denominator: fervent piety toward God and the Saint. To put it in a few words, she's akin to *zealotry personified*."

She looks sane, but I guess she really, really isn't.

Kaito could see that clearly. At the same time, he was reminded once more of the Church's deep-rooted perversion. Preserving the Grave Keeper's memories and personality was no doubt a necessary step for them to take in continuing to conceal the deadly secret that was the first demon's existence. People who could maintain their faith after seeing that thing were probably rarer than rare. But that had resulted in *her*.

You know, that stuff Izabella said is probably closer to how the Church is normally supposed to be.

But instead, they'd gotten the whole world involved and had sunk deeper and deeper into their mistakes.

What had gone wrong? How had things gotten to this point? No matter how hard he thought about it, no satisfying answer was forthcoming. Ever since the world had been created, or perhaps even before then, thin layers of madness had slowly been trying to engulf everything. But even with the situation as tumultuous as it was, the trigger that had initiated the collapse was abundantly clear. Everything had started when the Butcher had sold Vlad that demon meat.

They really did need to talk to the Butcher directly. With that thought in mind, Kaito asked a new question.

"Where are you guys keeping the Butcher?"

The Grave Keeper completely ignored him, instead tilting her head to the side.

Still surrounded by Lute's subordinates, Jeanne was sitting coolly on the floor. The Grave Keeper's gaze shifted to Jeanne's defenseless profile. Then, in a gentle voice, she called out to the golden Torture Princess.

"I've heard reports on you, you know. The other Torture Princess. The girl who proclaims herself the maiden of salvation, who rejects God's will, who

would pour poisoned wine upon the Saint's lips. You're a fool of a wholly different sort than we... Although I also hear that despite that mechanical impression you give, you took quite a liking to our Izabella Vicker."

"So I did. She was my first love, you see."

Jeanne's response was instant.

The next moment, the eyes of everyone present save the Grave Keeper went wide.

"Huh?"

"What?"

"Excuse me?"

"I beg your pardon?"

The brief comment she'd given may as well have been a bomb.

Upon hearing the words *first love*, Kaito, Elisabeth, Hina, and even Lute reeled. Embarrassed by their reactions, they all then shut up, and an indescribable silence descended upon the room.

Other than the Grave Keeper, whose smile was unchanged, they all wore truly peculiar expressions.

Then Jeanne gave her continuation in the same emotionless voice as always.

"I'm sorry. That was a joke."

"A joke?! I thought you were being serious! Now is hardly the time to be saying such things!"

Elisabeth slammed her fist onto the ground, and it sank gently into the bear pelt. Kaito rapidly nodded his assent. Jeanne's so-called "joke" was tone-deaf in the extreme. However, she wasn't done talking yet.

"However, I do feel that it was something similar. **But hey, beats me!** I was chosen by the alchemists to save the world and raised solely for that purpose. I was a princess and a sacrifice. I was created by them, and I destroyed them. For that was my contract with them. Neither of us resented the other. However, I had little direct contact with humans, so I was concerned as how best to

interact with the stray sheep until I obtained a servant. So I went to some bandits in a neighboring mountain, **snatched 'em up**, and learned from their example.”

“Wait, so *that's* why your speech gets vulgar at random intervals?!”

One mystery had been solved, at least. Now they knew the context behind the fact that Jeanne's word choice would regularly take a turn for the incredibly coarse. But what they didn't know was why she'd chosen then to share that seemingly irrelevant piece of information with them. Ignoring Kaito's expression of bewilderment, Jeanne kept speaking.

“So that was my first time.”

“Your first time...what?”

“My first time meeting an ‘ordinary human’ like that.”

This time, Jeanne answered Kaito's question. For a moment, her rose eyes went vacant.

Then she whispered in an uncharacteristically hazy voice.

“My **li'l miss** was foolish...but she was gallant, and she had honor.”

That simple sentence hit Kaito like a train. He gazed at her profile and ruminated.

Her interactions with people had been severely limited. That was what had made Jeanne the way she was today, into the maiden of salvation. She never looked back at those she'd trampled over, nor did she spare a thought for her victims. But if a single person she perceived differently existed, then...

If that's the case, then...that basically is a first love, isn't it?

Kaito almost said it aloud, but he held his tongue. Pointing it out now wouldn't do them any good.

Izabella was currently far away from them. She'd carried out her will and returned to the Church. And it was anyone's guess as to what had happened to her after being captured by the group of executioner-like people.

No, wait. There is one person.

There was a chance that the Grave Keeper knew whether or not Izabella was safe.

Kaito instinctively turned to look at her. As he did, a sleazy smile spread across her youthful face.

Upon seeing it, a chill ran down his spine. Frantically, he tried to ask about Izabella's well-being. But Jeanne spoke first, as though to stop him. Her voice was coolheaded to the last.

"Even so, trying to use my **li'l miss** as bait to negotiate with me is a waste of your time, fanatic. **I'm too late, ain't I?! Jackasses like you always go by the same damn playbook!**"

"Wait, hold on, 'too late'? You mean Izabella is...?"

Kaito's face went pale. The next moment, Izabella's smiling face flashed vividly across his mind. White light had been exploding at her back, and she'd been smiling. Even with the cruel scars etched across her face, she'd still been beautiful.

Izabella is...

A chuckle slipped unbidden from the Grave Keeper's mouth.

Kaito reflexively made to grab at her vestment's collar.

Skree!

Before he could, though, a shrill noise filled the room. As it did, the leather flap at the camp's entrance violently flapped inward.

Everyone turned to look. Heaving a stately sigh, the Grave Keeper rose to her feet.

Her crimson cloak trailed behind her as she silently walked to the entranceway and unfastened its leather knot. When she rolled it up, an orb flew inside, along with a mysterious, cutting wind.

The orb was one of the Church's communication devices. The wings on its sides softly fell out as it alighted on the Grave Keeper's palm. Runes ran across its surface, ones far more intricate than those Kaito was familiar with.

It looked like the message the Grave Keeper had just received had been encrypted. After she read it, her eyes narrowed.

“Good work out there. Now convey this to the lookout: ‘It’s Yah Llodi all over again.’”

The Grave Keeper gently tossed up the communication device. A fresh pair of wings sprouted from its sides.

Then they flapped, and the orb took off. After watching it get swallowed up by the snowscape, the Grave Keeper returned the entrance to the way she’d found it. Turning back around, she placed a hand atop her chest.

Her scarlet cloak fluttered as she gave a deep bow to those assembled.

“I’m afraid I must take my leave. It’s quite unfortunate, but there are some rather troubling matters I find myself needing to attend to. While it was perhaps too short to glean much importance from, I believe that our little rendezvous was a meaningful one. Pagan hunts and inquisitions are so *ineffective*, and they leave such poor legacies, after all. Not even I wish to turn all the world’s creatures against me. Instead, I simply pray that you all will find it in yourselves to have a change of heart, even if it’s but a small one.”

The Grave Keeper’s words were chosen carefully. The scariest thing, though, was the fact that the sheer *compassion* dripping from her voice seemed entirely heartfelt. She placed her small palms together and closed her eyes, as though she was praying.

“‘You are free to act as you will. But pray that God shall be your salvation. For the beginning, the middle, and the end all lie in the palm of His hand.’ The blessings of God and the Saint on you all.”

Then the Grave Keeper raised her head and offered them a sweet smile. Not a single person returned it. Seemingly unhurt by that fact, though, she began walking. The beastfolk stared daggers at her as she rolled up the leather door once more. However, she stopped for a moment before heading out into the snowscape.

“But worry not. We’ll be enemies from here on out, just as you wish.”

With that quiet murmur, she began walking again. The entrance flapped back

to a rest.

And with that, she was gone.



It feels like a typhoon just passed through.

Kaito surveyed the room in a daze. It looked no different than it had before, but it felt as though it had been draped in a thick film. That was just how badly the entity known as the Grave Keeper had thrown the mood into disarray. As he tried to shake off a numbing sense of fatigue, Kaito turned his thoughts to Izabella's well-being.

So...what happened to her?

The Grave Keeper's twisted smile flashed through his mind. He recognized that sadistic smile; he'd seen it time and time again back when he was alive.

He opened his mouth to speak. But before he could put his tenacious sense of unease into words, Elisabeth stood up.

"We're leaving, Kaito. A clear target has presented itself to us."

"A target? You mean we're gonna tail the Grave Keeper or something?"

If they did that, they'd probably be able to find out where the Church had made their camp. But they also ran the risk of running into the Church's main force. Kaito chose to leave those concerns implicit. However, Elisabeth shook her head as she replied.

"She knows me not, and as such, she was negligent. Ever since Godd Deos's time, I've been carefully stealing secret records from the Church and breaking their cipher. As such, I was able to read that last message."

"Wait, seriously?"

"Heh, seeing a code would make any mage wish to crack it. And I had my suspicions that the day such knowledge would become useful would arrive. And now it has. Rather impressive of me, if I do say so myself."

As she sang her own praises, Elisabeth chugged down the rest of the tea that she'd been continuing to hold the whole time. Once she was finished, Hina, who was waiting on standby, took the empty bowl.

“Good work, Hina. ’Twas splendid as always. Your talents never disappoint.”

“You’re too kind, Lady Elisabeth. Your words fill me with such joy. But, um, if I may ask, what were the contents of the transmission?”

Hina asked this question in a nervous tone. Their next actions as a group hinged on the answer. Everyone swallowed as they waited for Elisabeth’s reply. Its contents, however, were unexpected.

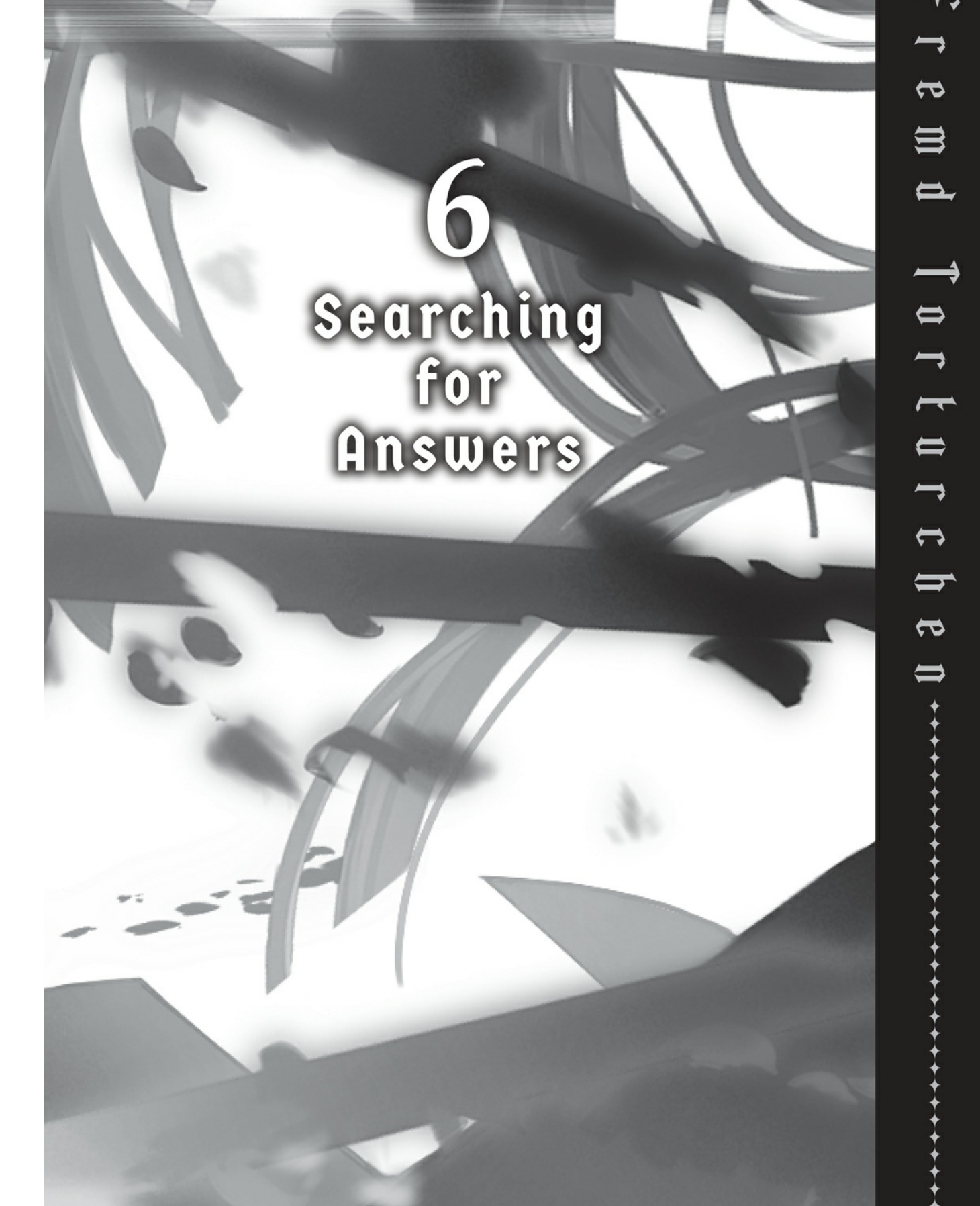
“‘The cage in headquarters was opened. The lookouts were unconscious, struck in the back of the head.’ In other words...”

The scene he’d seen back at Elisabeth’s castle spontaneously flashed before Kaito’s eyes.

The Butcher had been able to unlock even the Torture Princess’s own Gibbet. There was no way any man-made cage could contain him. And what would he do after he escaped the cage?

Elisabeth went on, her voice echoing Kaito’s thoughts exactly.

“At present, the Butcher’s whereabouts are unknown. It would seem that he’s fled somewhere.”



6

Searching for Answers

F r e m d T o r l o r c h e n



6

Searching for Answers

Now that they knew that the Butcher had escaped, they had to act fast.

Leaving the warm, comfortable campsite behind them, Kaito and the others plunged once more into the world of ice and snow.

The air shimmered and sparkled as it had before. The snowflakes were unchanged, too, still piled high atop the vast plain of ice. The scenery before them was radiant and beautiful, as though they'd stepped inside a snow globe.

The vast, endless snowscape seemed just the same as ever.

Kaito's group, on the other hand, had expanded. At the end of their procession stood Lute, clad in thick winter gear due to his inability to use magic. As the copper wolf stared straight ahead, Kaito called out to him.

"Are you sure you wanna come with us? There's no telling what's gonna happen after we catch up with the Butcher, you know."

"Whatever are you talking about? Sitting idly by after being insulted so would be a disgrace to my name as a warrior. And you say that this escapee of yours is not only the Apostle who summoned us to the World's End but may even know the Saint's whereabouts?! Why, how could I *not* pursue him?!"

Lute's ears perked up as he gave his determined reply. However, he had ordered his subordinates to wait on standby at the camp. He'd claimed that too large a group would be too conspicuous, but that was likely just a pretense. He probably intended to personally take full responsibility if things went south with the Church. Kaito had been concerned about the extent of Lute's resolve, but he hadn't stopped him.

Everyone's got pride, something they refuse to back down from. Right now, it's probably for the best if I just don't say anything.

With Lute having joined their ranks, Kaito had decided to leave Vlad sealed in his jewel. The jewel in question was shaking at regular intervals as though trying to express its displeasure. Kaito, however, staunchly ignored it.

With Lute added and Vlad subtracted, the five of them advanced, spearheaded by Gargantua.

In the end, they'd decided to head for the Church's encampment.

They were aware of the risk that they'd run into the Church's main force, but the amount of information they had on the Butcher's whereabouts was fundamentally deficient. In order to get a sense of which way he'd fled, they'd decided to covertly track the Church's movements.

In order to avoid getting into a fight, all Deus Ex Machinas besides Gargantua were hard at work searching for their foes.

It appeared that the Grave Keeper had left on foot. Her footprints were so faint, they hardly seemed to be there at all, but Gargantua followed them unhesitatingly. At present, it was equipped with extra parts specifically for that purpose. After borrowing Jabberwocky's warped glass, it had fashioned what appeared to be a pair of eyes. They were enlarged, as though they were looking through glasses, and they swiveled and turned as Gargantua made its pointy way across the icy ground.

The plan had been for Gargantua to switch off with Pantagruel once the Grave Keeper's footprints faded so it could track her by her mana. However, it didn't look like that would be necessary. Kaito and the others continued following Gargantua in silence.

No matter how far they went, the scenery never changed. That, in and of itself, was unsettling.

If all of it is beautiful, then it kinda feels like everything in it is dead.

A chill ran down Kaito's spine, one completely unrelated to the cold. The notion that they were merely going around in circles began captivating him. Right as it did, though, Gargantua came to a sudden stop.

Thrusting one leg into the ice to use as a fulcrum, the automaton spun around. It turned to face Jeanne and rattled its head up and down. It was clearly

conveying something to her, as Jeanne quietly nodded back.

“Ah, I understand now. **C’mon, ya lumps! Keep up!**”

Jeanne and Gargantua changed course. Turning to the side, they set out perpendicularly from where they had stopped. Kaito found it rather difficult to believe that the Grave Keeper had traveled in such a bizarre manner.

It would appear that the two of them had stopped following the Grave Keeper’s tracks altogether.

But then where are they going?

Right as doubts started crossing through Kaito’s mind, though, Gargantua stopped and began walking parallel to their original route.

Kaito and the others followed after it. As they did, the scenery around them began gradually changing. The ground began sloping up at a much more noticeable angle than the hill they’d visited earlier. Kaito found himself on the verge of slipping a number of times. Each time, though, Hina successfully managed to support him. Constantly thanking her, Kaito laboriously made his way up the silvery hill.

Especially large snowflakes began crunching under his feet, and he called ahead to Jeanne.

“So why’d we stop following the footprints and come this way instead?”

“The number of sets of prints increased. Do you know why that is, mister?”

“...The Grave Keeper must have met up with her subordinates. We must be near their camp.”

“Precisely. A keen hypothesis, coming from The Fool. Furthermore, the Deus Ex Machinas share information among themselves. According to Pantagruel, this cliff is the optimal location from which to observe their camp. Also, do make sure you avoid walking in front of Gargantua. **Falling to your death before we meet our first foe would be a hell of a bad joke!**”

Kaito cocked his head, confused by Jeanne’s warning. It sounded like there was a cliff in front of them, sure, but not even he was dumb enough to just fall over its edge. A moment later, he took it all back.

Gargantua had come to an abrupt stop. Before it lay nothingness.

The ground in front of its silver legs had cleanly vanished. It was like someone had carved it off with a knife, then stuck a fork in it and carried it away. No normal cliff declined so sharply.

Oh man, I would totally have fallen off there.

Narrowly stopping as well, Kaito broke out in an internal cold sweat. He timidly peeked over the edge.

He could make out the Church's camp way down below. A number of tents were lined up in orderly, systematic intervals. Each one bore at least two flags emblazoned with white lilies and images of the Saint. Fires were lit throughout the camp, illuminating it amid the snow. They were clearly having to put much more work into maintaining their heat than the beastfolk had.

They'd probably even put their camp's back to a cliff in order to stave off some of the wind chill.

The speck-like people in the camp were hustling and bustling, no doubt due to the Butcher's disappearance. After he mentally recovered from the sudden appearance of the cliff's edge, though, Kaito's eyes came to rest on something else entirely.

"Hey, what's...? Oh, geez."

There was something above the cliff.

The figure had been frozen stiff with its arms spread out wide. It looked like a statue of some sort of pagan god or perhaps an inane scarecrow. It was a man dangling in the air. His body was supported by a thick stake, which pierced through his buttocks and exited his mouth. Frozen blood and feces dripped down between his legs.

His eyes were open in an expression of intense agony. It looked like the stake had been driven in while he was still alive.

With a second glance, Kaito confirmed the cruel truth: the man, clad in a luxurious vestment, had been impaled.

Then his body had been put on public display atop the cliff.

“Who is that?”

“...Yah Llodl.”

“What?!”

Upon hearing Elisabeth’s answer, Kaito let out a surprised yelp.

After Godd Deos’s death, Yah Llodl had taken advantage of the Church’s changing power dynamics to join its upper echelon. And even with just the small conversation he’d had with Yah Llodl over a communication device, the man’s pride had been abundantly clear. Yet, now, this was the state he was in. His failure back at the underground tomb had probably been the cause.

And as far as people who could have gotten away with purging him went, only one came to Kaito’s mind.

After all, when she’d heard about the Butcher’s escape, this was what she’d said:

“Good work out there. Now convey this to the lookout: ‘It’s Yah Llodl all over again.’”

“...The Grave Keeper.”

There was no doubt in his mind that she was the one behind the grim spectacle before him.

Kaito had long since gotten used to seeing torture. And loath as he was to admit it, looking at someone who’d been impaled almost had a sort of familiarity to it. Even so, seeing the corpse of someone whose arrogant laugh he’d just heard came as a blow. Elisabeth and Jeanne, on the other hand, seemed to regard Yah Llodl’s death with complete disinterest. Taking their eyes off the body, they looked back toward the camp.

“Hmph, I see.”

“Indeed. It’s rather unambiguous.”

There was no reason for Lute to know who Yah Llodl was, but he still seemed to find the Torture Princesses’ composure unsettling. However, he, too, realized that retreating would accomplish nothing.

Because of that, he cautiously followed their lead. Kaito and Hina lined up beside them and did the same.

Before long, Kaito found himself frowning. The Church's camp was even more chaotic than he'd expected.

Cautious inspection made it clear that they were split into two large factions.

One group of people was wearing silver armor with pelts draped over themselves to keep out the cold, and the other group was clad in scarlet, executioner-like outfits. Each one was gathered together and acting as a unit, like two herds of different beasts.

"It falls well within my expectations, but it seems they aren't a monolith, are they?"

"Indeed, that they are not. **And it's a big ol' laugh, coming from chumps who're goin' on about reconstructing the world! You're all pilin' into the same damn grave, ain'tcha?! Shepherds and sheep refusing to get along—what a riot!**"

Elisabeth narrowed her crimson eyes, and Jeanne raised her voice in scorn.

Kaito immediately deduced what the two of them were talking about.

The paladins and executioner-looking guys aren't exactly enemies, but could it be that they're on bad terms?

The paladins looked to be forming a search party all on their own. They headed south, but their spirits seemed low, and they could hardly be described as unified. Instead of rebuking them for their sloth, though, the executioner-like group merely headed north. Neither group seemed to have any intention of working with the other.

In fact, the executioners seemed to be avoiding the paladins.

"What's going on? They came all the way to the World's End, and now they aren't even gonna work together?"

"The paladins have lost their commander. Though she was young, they put a great deal of trust and responsibility in Izabella. Trying to keep their morale up despite having her unjustly snatched away from them would be a fool's errand.

And this is the World's End. Unlike the Capital, the Church can deploy their transfigured paladins freely. That scarlet bunch would likely have preferred to come here with themselves and their grotesque pawns alone."

"However, while the reconstruction sect holds the reins of power within the Church, their control is not absolute."

Jeanne took the explanation over from Elisabeth and dispassionately laid out the current state of affairs within the Church.

"Refusing to take the normal paladins along would have earned the distrust of the royals and some of the notable aristocrats. Even with the attractive proposition of escaping the grand burden of having to rebuild the Capital, the reconstruction sect will fail to sway many of the less devout. **And the powerful have a tendency to value gold higher than God, y'see. They both have a way of slippin' away when you really need 'em, though!**"

Taking Jeanne's mocking words into account, Kaito took another look at what the people down below were doing.

The streams of silver and crimson had completely split apart, serving well to illustrate the discord present among their camp.

"As a result, the normal paladins were taken along, but in name alone. The grotesque pawns are likely off searching, and the scarlet lot is no doubt going to join them and try to capture the Butcher. The paladins, on the other hand, seem to have been sent off in the opposite direction. With that in mind, it would appear that the north is far more promising. The Butcher fled quickly, though. I have my doubts as to whether they'll truly be able to catch him..."

"Excuse me, Lady Elisabeth?"

"Hmm? What is it, Hina? ...Oh-ho?"

As Hina repeatedly tapped on her shoulder, Elisabeth turned around. After looking in the direction Hina was indicating, she blinked repeatedly. A silly expression crossed Kaito's face, as well.

At some point, something had taken a seat atop Yah Llodl's corpse's shoulder.

It was a small emerald-green mass, and it was gnawing on his frozen ear.

Startled, Lute reeled backward. As he pointed at the mass, a cry slipped out of his mouth.

“Y-you! You’re the irreverent whelp who invaded Lady Vyade Ula Forstlast’s bedchambers!”

“Kyau!”

The response he received sounded entirely innocent. The dragon whelp began turning lively somersaults in the air. Its splendid tail, which seemed a bit too large for its body, swayed behind it. It didn’t look repentant in the slightest.

How long had it been there? Just as that question crossed Kaito’s mind, though, a more pressing concern weighed on him.

The body was put on display up here.

In other words, the Church was fully aware of how well the cliff overlooked their base. It was odd, then, that they hadn’t stationed any guards there. As he carefully surveyed their surroundings, Kaito gasped.

“Hey, wait, Elisabeth! Look where you’re stepping!”

“Hmm? Ah, I see. Little wonder, then, that standing here was so comfortable!”

Elisabeth nodded. Beneath her high heels was a man buried in the snow. His scarlet hood peeked out from amid the white. He appeared to be unconscious.

Worried that the man might freeze to death, Kaito frantically reached out his hand. When he touched the man’s skin, though, it was strangely warm. Apparently, he’d stored magic stones on his extremities to preserve his body heat. A jewel designed for communications was installed on his chest as well. In all likelihood, he was the one who’d been in charge of guarding the cliff top.

But why, then, was he unconscious?

Kaito cast a sidelong glance at the whelp. Its emerald scales glittered as it spun around in the air. Each time it twirled, it lashed out with its tail. A blow from that looked to be about as powerful as one from a blackjack from Kaito’s old world. “Kyoon!” the whelp cried as it puffed out its chest.

Upon seeing the vigor with which the whelp was making its claim, Kaito

noded in conviction.

“Looks like this guy’s our culprit.”

“Aye, no doubt. Excellent work, you!”

“Dunno if that’s really something you should be complimenting it for.”

“Excuse me, Mr. Whelp, but why did you knock out the lookout and then stay here?”

“Kyoona!”

By means of answering Hina’s question, the whelp let out a loud cry. Then, with a chomp, it tore off Yah Llodl’s ear. After tossing it up in the air and catching it in its mouth, it gobbled the dead flesh down.

Kaito and Lute openly grimaced. Apparently done trying to cheer them up, the whelp shot into the air like a bullet. Then, without a moment’s hesitation, it began flying off into the silvery atmosphere.

For a second, it turned back toward Kaito and the others. It seemed to want them to follow it.

Kaito was reminded of the chunk of bone-in meat that had been left behind at the castle. It looked as though, just like back then, the Butcher had predicted their movements once more and had sent the whelp to guide them. He was clearly trying to send them somewhere.

Whether that was a good thing or a bad thing was still anyone’s guess.

Either way, our only real option is to follow it.

Knowing that, Kaito steeled his resolve. Leaving the corpse and unconscious lookout behind them, they all took off at a run.

Then, following the distant whelp, they began making their way down the pearly hill.



The whelp looked like it was flying aimlessly.

Its wings were comprised of thin bone and membrane, and it flapped them to fly high up into the milky-white, rainbow-tinged sky. Then it would glide for a

while. It seemed to be rather enjoying its travels. However, for those trying to follow it, the wasteful movements in its flight path were the source of a great deal of stress. Kaito's displeasure was painted all across his face.

"Hey, does that thing even really know where it's going?"

"Hmm... It does belong to the Butcher, after all."

"And Mr. Butcher is awfully fond of playing around. I suppose we can only hope."

Elisabeth's shoulders slumped, and Hina smiled to try to placate her.

Continuing forward through the unchanging snowscape was hard on the legs, but it was harder on the spirit. However, it quickly became clear that, despite the whelp's playful flight, their efforts hadn't been wasted.

A living creature's corpse had appeared before them in the empty world.

When Kaito first saw it, his immediate reaction was shock.

Whatever the something was, it was made up of fragments of ice and snow. Its body was unsettlingly linear, and if he had to compare it to something, it looked somewhat like a fish. But even upon getting a closer look, it was difficult for a human to truly understand its appearance. After all, their brains refused to parse some of the optical information on it. In fact, it was hard to say definitively if *living creature* was really the right descriptor for it. The only thing sure about it was that it possessed a concept of "death."

All in total, there were four of the somethings. They were lying horizontally, their pyramid-shaped heads all caved in.

"...Hmm. This land seems free of foreign invaders, yet they appear to have been killed by something."

Elisabeth stooped down and began inspecting the damaged sections. Kaito did the same. Once they did, a commonality emerged. All four of them seemed to have been struck by something soft. Also, there was blubber stuck to their wounds.

"With my cunning intellect, I've unraveled all the mysteries. The weapon...was a slab of meat!"

“I’d be surprised if it was anything else. In other words, that means the Butcher definitely passed this way.”

The two of them nodded to each other. This time, the whelp’s somersaults seemed to be saying, *See?*

Now trusting its guidance, the group resumed their pursuit of the Butcher. They carefully walked among the somethings’ corpses. As Kaito stood atop an unsullied patch of ice, though, a snapping sound rang out from around his feet.

“Huh?”

“Is something the matter, Sir Kaito? Hmm?”

Lute turned around as well, and his ears perked up. The two of them started inspecting the ground at their feet for presences. The moment they did, a square chunk of ice *directly below Kaito* cracked and burst up into the air. Slipping along its now-slanted surface, Kaito narrowly managed to land on his feet.

“...!”

“Ah!”

A massive slab of ice had pierced through the ground. Innumerable cracks were running along its surface.

The slab then split into fine vertical segments. Its cylindrical fragments danced through the air, then recombined into a three-dimensional shape. The transformation it underwent was impressive, like a single sheet of paper being spliced into a meaningful form.

Chilly air blew off its body as the completed something bent into a fishlike shape. However, it had no scales and no mouth. It swung its smooth, clear, pyramid-shaped head down onto Kaito.

Drawing his sword, Lute stepped forward, intending to meet the hammer-like blow.

“Fall back, Sir Kaito! I shall repay the debt I once—”

“How dare you try to strike my dear husband, you hoodluuuuuuuuuuum!”

However, Lute's noble declaration was drowned out by indignation and fury. His ears went slack, and he stopped in his tracks.

Hina dashed across the ice like a cannonball. Accompanied by her vaunted halberd, she twirled freely through the air.

"Hyaaah!"

Her maid uniform fluttering, she raised her weapon aloft behind her back. Then, as she flew forward, she swung it down hard. Its blade crashed solidly into the something's side.

There was the sound of glass cracking. The something's body flushed with white, then shattered.

Its needle-thin fragments scattered all about. Upon mixing in with the snowflakes, they ceased to even be visible.

Hina then landed with an elegant *thump*. After courteously straightening her maid outfit, she gave a sweet bow.

"Phew. With that, the cleaning is successfully finished. How was that, Master Kaito?"

"Perfect as always, my dearest Hina."

"Eek! Oh, Master Kaito! Not in public! Why, how embarrassing!"

As she let out quiet shrieks, Hina covered her reddening face. Watching over her with affection, Kaito nodded. Lute stepped back as he commented, "Very... very well, then," and a bemused expression overtook Elisabeth's face.

The sole member to ignore the commotion and continue walking was Jeanne. Everyone else then hurried after her.

And with that, Kaito and the others left the somethings' corpses behind and continued pursuing the Butcher as though nothing had changed.



Eventually, their surroundings started to transform with increasing speed. Snow began falling from the empty sky.

The massive flakes resembling delicate lacework fluttered gently through the

air. Upon closer inspection, each one of them had a unique shape. In all likelihood, no two of them were alike.

The strange rainbow membrane covering the milky-white sky was beginning to get thicker as well. Snowflakes tumbled lazily down from within it. It looked like silvery flower petals being spat out from inside an oil slick.

Anywhere else, such a blizzard of petals would have been unimaginable.

The area around Kaito's group had long since taken on an otherworldly quality to it. If someone had told them it was the afterlife, they practically would have believed it. Kaito's eyes were captivated by the landscape's untarnished, lifeless beauty.

The world was hollow and empty, and it was terrifying. But at the same time, it was also endlessly fascinating.

As Kaito was preoccupied by all that, the whelp abruptly stopped advancing.

"Kyau!"

With a loud cry, it gave its wings a powerful downward flap. After making a sharp nosedive, it suddenly vanished without a trace.

"Wait, where'd he go?"

Kaito looked down in a panic. The scenery, which had had a bare minimum of regularity to it, had come to a complete and total stop. At some point, a narrow, deep fissure had appeared before them. In contrast with its transparent icy walls, the ravine was filled with a pervasive darkness. The whelp must have flown down into it.

It was almost like it was trying to say that its task was complete.

Now convinced that something awaited them beyond the crevice, Kaito turned to look up.

The fissure extended farther and farther. Little by little, it grew wider and deeper. Beside it, a new fissure stretched out its distant arm as well. They continued on like a pair of wide rivers.

Eventually, they met up and converged on a colossal hole.

The pit resembled a volcano's crater with its gaping maw.

Suddenly, a strange conviction assailed Kaito.

Let's say hypothetically that all the ice in the World's End melted. What would happen?

The water probably wouldn't reach the sea. Regardless of whatever differences in height there may be, every drop of it would flow into that hole. Yet, even so, the void would remain. Even if it swallowed up everything else, nothing could ever fill that abyss.

And at the same time, Kaito remembered something he'd once heard.

Someone once said that the world has no end. The world is round, they proclaimed, and as such it has no terminus.

Someone once said that the world has an end. It's like a waterfall, they proclaimed, one that swallows up anything and everything.

Someone once said that the world has an end. For God created that place, they proclaimed, and designated it "the World's End."

"...The World's End."

Kaito mumbled that phrase once more. Unlike the world he'd come from, in this one, there was a real chance that all three stories about the World's End were true. The world was round, and it had no terminus. But it did have an End, one that God had designated. And therein lay a waterfall that swallowed up anything and everything.

As those thoughts rattled around in his head, Kaito's vision wandered.

Given that the whelp had disappeared, this was no doubt the "answer" they'd been searching for.

"Master Kaito, over there."

"Ah, there, huh?"

After looking to where Hina was pointing, Kaito nodded. A narrow path just barely lay between the two crevices. And someone was standing at its end. The figure was black, and it was standing alone before the pit.

In a way, it looked lonely.

As though it had been waiting a long, long time for someone who had never come.

“...The Butcher.”

A brief murmur escaped Elisabeth’s lips. Kaito was about to break out in a run, but then he heard something.

“Ah, what an excellent job you all did finding him! Now, at long last, I’ve finally reached a complete understanding!”

A loud voice called out from behind him. Lodged within it was an unfathomable amount of joy.

Goose bumps rose all across Kaito’s flesh. Horrified from the bottom of his heart, he felt his face stiffen as he turned around to look.

“Blessings on you, and blessings on me! Everything is just as you will it!”

Standing behind him was exactly who he’d expected to find.

Her snowflake-covered crimson cloak fluttered, and she was flanked on all sides by grotesque, transfigured paladins.

The image of the giant men protecting an adorable little girl was almost picturesque, like a painting of a maiden surrounded by monsters. But in reality, it was the girl who was the monster, not the transformed men.

It was the living symbol of zealotry, the Grave Keeper.

As she looked down upon Kaito and the others, a smile dripping with affection spread across her face.

7

Her
first
Love



Her First Love

“You all were perfectly able to pursue me. Thus, the converse should be true as well, no? I find it truly, truly sorrowful, you know, that we should meet again in such a way.”

The Grave Keeper launched into a sudden monologue. Words came pouring from her mouth with no preamble or introduction. Her face was dark beneath her scarlet hood, yet her white cheeks were tinged red like those of a maiden in love.

“It was said that the rights would be granted impartially. Equally, to all races, to all peoples. Yet, that was never anything more than a sweet little white lie. The Apostle made his choice back at the very beginning, he did.”

Kaito’s brows involuntarily furrowed. The Grave Keeper was clearly agitated about something, but he couldn’t for the life of him figure out what it was that had set her off.

Impartial rights... Is she talking about the letter the Butcher sent out? But this thing about the Apostle making his choice back at the start...what’s that about?

“It was simple once I put my mind to it. The fact that the whelp served as a guide was proof. The fact that he sought ‘two’ was proof. And if that is the case, then it’s hardly my place to raise objections. It’s only right that the number of people who receive blessings be limited. Only a few shall bear witness to her sacred awakening. For that, verily, is providence, is it not?”

The Grave Keeper’s tone began gradually shifting. It started to sound like she herself was the one she was trying to convince. An indescribable sense of unease washed over Kaito. Lute’s reaction seemed no different.

Elisabeth and Jeanne, on the other hand, appeared wholly unfazed. It seemed that the two Torture Princesses had anticipated a showdown with the Grave

Keeper. Even so, though, Elisabeth raised an eyebrow.

“...Just what exactly are you going on about?”

Kaito was taken aback. Apparently, not even Elisabeth knew the reason behind the Grave Keeper’s confusion. Jeanne’s expression was as blank as always, and her rose-colored gaze was steely.

Instinctively, Kaito grabbed on to the jewel within his pocket. Heat emanated from the stone by means of a response.

Letting Vlad out here might be a good idea.

As the Kaiser would have it, Vlad was “He Who Rears Hell Within His Mind.” His disposition was fundamentally calm, but his nature was twisted and mad. There was a good chance that he’d be able to interpret the Grave Keeper’s ramblings for them. But calling Vlad out here would raise problems of its own.

Standing around the Grave Keeper was a group of gigantic, transfigured paladins. Their stiff armor was spread out over their engorged muscles like caramel. Their limbs were elongated as well, knees, elbows, and all. However, their transformations were just slight enough that they still counted as “human.”

They were no doubt the cream of the crop, those who’d either been relatively compatible or those who’d successfully been able to take in pain.

They were currently standing in a line, stock-still and with their swords pointed toward the ground like a row of statues. However, there was no telling how they’d react if he added Vlad to the mix. Odds were good that a battle would break out before Kaito even had a chance to ask Vlad to interpret.

Hina was standing in front of him, protecting him with her halberd at the ready. Lute also had a firm grip on his sword’s handle.

Everyone present was prepared for fighting to break out at any moment.

And no wonder... Now that we’ve come head-to-head like this, it’s not like we have room to worry about power struggles or politics anymore.

After all, the Apostle, which was to say, the Butcher, was within their line of sight. It was only a matter of time before they started trying to kill each other in

earnest. And only the survivors would end up finding out where the Saint was resting. However, the Grave Keeper seemed to have only just caught on to the bloodlust emanating from Kaito's company.

She shook her head vigorously from side to side, as though to suggest that the entire thing was preposterous. Snowflakes fluttered loosely off her scarlet cloak. She then clutched tightly at her chest as she wrung her pained words out.

"No, no, heavens, no. I, and those who share my beliefs, no longer have any intention of turning our swords on you. Now it's faith that's required of us."

"...Wait, you're not here to fight us?"

"I believe in you all, you see. Even if you don't afford me the same sentiments! However, you require an ordeal. Indeed, one from another besides myself. However, that is all. That, truly, is all."

"...Someone other than you?"

Kaito felt an unpleasant premonition, and a chill ran down his spine. Even now, the Grave Keeper's voice was tinged with madness. Her pupils were dilated, her arms were spread wide, and spittle flew from her mouth as she talked.

"For the sake of the world, for the sake of the people, our revered Saint fell into slumber and shed tears of blood! *That* is what flows through the roots of the Church—her unrewarded love, her noble self-sacrifice! In the name of faith, in the name of the world, she cast herself aside! And what could that be but the most desirable trait possible for those chosen to possess! I have sacrificed everything, discarded even my ego! Can you, the chosen ones, say the same?"

As she forcefully posed her question, the Grave Keeper held her right arm aloft. An unpleasant metallic noise followed.

Upon looking at her hand, Kaito finally noticed something. Clenched within her small fist was the end of a silver chain.

The noise acted as a signal, and the paladins set into motion. Relinquishing their posts at the Grave Keeper's side, they parted to the left and right like waves. Then, in unison, the transfigured paladins knelt.

Then, pulled by the chain, something with four legs advanced between them.

The thing was a beast draped in fine scarlet cloth. Beneath the cloth, its flesh and bones burbled as they constantly swelled and contracted back to their original shape. Each time they did, blood gushed forth, and a cry of pain rose from beneath the folds.

The moment he heard it, Kaito shuddered. He recognized that voice.

Th-that's not...

"And here it is! Here it is, O unworthy contractor of mine!"

The Kaiser's laughs echoed within Kaito's eardrums. At the same time, he felt someone firmly staring at him. The boy who'd once saved him was looking straight at him, his unflinching gaze boring into Kaito's skin.

The dead boy, Neue, was asking Kaito a question with his eyes.

Can you? he was asking.

Can I what? replied Kaito silently. But even as he did, his thoughts naturally rushed to a certain fact.

I've slain a lot of people.

He'd drenched himself in blood, lost his left arm, and lost his status as a normal human. He'd killed foes, he'd killed demons, and he'd killed underlings. That was how he'd gotten by. But up until then, he'd never once killed someone he himself held dear. He'd gotten this far without ever needing to.

But Neue's gaze was asking him a question.

Can you? he was asking.

The Kaiser, on the other hand, was merely laughing his almost-human laugh.

"It seems a proper trial is upon you!"

There was no way Kaito could successfully feign ignorance as to what he was being told. He was well aware. There was no doubt in his mind as to what question he was being asked.

"Please show me tragic devotion befitting the favor you've received! Show it to me, if you'd be so kind!"

As she made her loud entreaty, the Grave Keeper yanked off the scarlet cloth. The curtain to the freak show had been drawn, and the creature's full body was revealed. Kaito reflexively looked down at his feet. Then he let out a violent whisper.

“..... You fucking monster.”

The thing beneath the cloth had *once been human*.

Its silver hair was longer than it had been before. It crept like vines, winding its tangled tips around the creature's legs. All its flesh had metamorphosized and had either swelled up like tumors or was sagging. Because of that, the scars that had once run across its skin were exaggerated, causing them to look like stitches. Its armor had been taken from it, and its spine was crooked and warped like an animal's. Its breasts rocked as they scratched against the surface of the ice.

Then *she* slowly looked up. When she did, her gemlike, mismatched blue and purple eyes came to rest on Kaito and the others.

Even now, her eyes were still beautiful.

"Ah... Ah, ah, ah, ahhhhhhhhh, ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

The creature let out a roar of agony. *Can you?* asked Neue's gaze once more.

Can you kill Izabella Vicker? he was asking.

Can you kill her, like all those transformed paladins you unhesitatingly decided there was no way to save?

Kaito parted his trembling lips. Then he gave his confession to the phantasm whom only he could see.

“I...can’t.”

Then the *thing that had once been Izabella* leaped.

Its sharp claws and fangs loudly bore down on Kaito.





There existed something that Kaito Sena had never thought about.

It was something he's stubbornly ignored time and time again.

For instance, there were all the people who'd been forcibly turned into underlings. For instance, there were the people whose pain had been used to pacify a demon. For instance, there were the paladins who had eaten demon flesh, either by force or by stupidity.

In other words, innocent victims.

Kaito had killed them, hoisting a flag of mercy all the while. Because he'd known that there was no other way to save them, he hadn't so much as hesitated. Despite its hypocrisy, the act itself had been compassionate. However, therein lay room for a question to arise. It was a question related to an instance that had yet to occur, one that Kaito had purposefully avoided thinking about.

What if, hypothetically, one of the victims was someone Kaito knew well?

Would it still be so easy for me to kill them, claiming that there weren't any other options?

Could he, Kaito Sena, do that? Or was the reason he'd been able to avoid hesitating merely because the victims hadn't meant anything to him?

...It's the latter.

Now Kaito could be sure of that. That was the plain truth of the matter. Even so, he still didn't believe that he'd been in the wrong. Someone you knew would invariably be more important to you than someone you didn't. That was just how the world worked.

And at the same time, killing someone, even someone who meant nothing to you, was hard on a person. It wasn't as though Kaito was a homicidal maniac or something. In order to save someone who was constantly suffering, though, someone else necessarily had to get their hands dirty.

Suffering an eternity of pain was a cruel thing indeed. Because he believed that, Kaito had drenched his hands in blood.

Doesn't it make it blasphemous if I can't do the same now, then?

"I did it to you all, but I can't do the same to someone I know."

Was he really going to face the mountain of corpses he'd piled up and say that? It would be complete and utter bullshit.

And it would be deeply, deeply unforgivable.

But of course, Kaito Sena already knew all that.



Back in the real world, that entire train of thought had gone through his mind in the space of a blink.

As he returned to his senses, Kaito channeled mana into the soles of his feet, propelling himself back on his own strength. Not a second later, Izabella's forearm shattered the icy ground before him. He landed a hairbreadth beside Hina, who had almost taken off at a run. As she breathed a sigh of relief, a heartbroken light passed through Hina's eyes.

"Master Kaito... I understand how you feel, but..."

"Huh? ...Oh."

It was then that Kaito first realized that his hand was outstretched and had been for some time. Grabbing his right arm with its beastly left counterpart, he forcibly wrenched it back down. Then, with trembling fingers, he stroked his cheek.

I knew it was gonna end like this. Or, at least, I should have known.

Kaito had left Izabella behind, knowing full well what would become of her. Even so, the scene before his eyes smashed his heart to pieces like a hammer.

That was simply how cruel Izabella's transformation had been.

Elisabeth said nothing. Surprisingly, Jeanne's expressionless face showed no changes.

Lute, however, let out a low growl, sword in hand. He narrowed his eyes, as though digging through his memories.

"Sir Kaito, is perchance that monster someone you...? No, I, too, know her

name. Izabella. Izabella the paladin... That silver hair, the color of those eyes... Could that truly be Izabella Vicker? Why, that's their commander! Why has she become such a thing?"

"Lute, you and Izabella knew each other?"

"She paid us a few courtesy calls regarding the assistance Lady Vyade Ula Forstlast was providing in rebuilding the Capital. Her manners were rare for a human, and she valued repaying her debts. Why, from her second visit on, she even brought souvenirs for my wife! Well, I suppose that hardly qualifies as knowing her. Yet, still..."

Then Lute stiffened his jaw, his teeth audibly grinding together. As he looked at Izabella's grotesque form, his lupine eyes flashed. Dumbfounded, he repeated himself.

"Still..."

"It's okay, Lute. It's more than enough in my book."

If it was someone he hadn't known, he could likely have put her down out of pity. But knowing her character, how warm her heart had once been, would have dulled anyone's blade. That was just the way things were. Sentiment had the power to radically change the weight of a murder.

Even so, though, there were times when battle was inevitable.

Now was one of those times.

"Ah-gah-gah-gah-gah-gah-gah-gah-gah, ehhhhh, eh, aaaaaAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!"

Izabella let out a maddened scream. Several of her bones had pointlessly expanded. In particular, her knees and elbows pierced through her skin. Each time she moved, blood flowed freely from her body. In spite of that, though, she leaped around with clear purpose.

Her silver hair grew violently disheveled. Chunks wrapped around her limbs tore free, taking bits of scalp with them as they went.

"Hee-hee-hee-hee-hee-hee-hee, ha-ha-ha-ha, hyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

Even so, she continued laughing at the top of her voice. Recollections started

flashing through Kaito's mind.

Then, despite knowing that it was the most meaninglessly sentimental thing he could possibly do, he began filtering through his memories.

First, he thought back to what had happened in the Capital, back when the demonic mass of flesh had invaded.

Izabella's straight silver hair had glistened in the moonlight. Back then, not a single scar had marred her skin. After unhesitatingly taking the Kaiser's contractor's hand in hers, she'd spoken.

"Let's take out that demon together."

Next, he thought about the events back in the demon's world, the space where everything died.

Paying no heed to the fact that the force of her mana was tearing apart her skin from inside, Izabella had shouted at him through a communication device.

"Don't give me that nonsense, Kaito Sena! Enough is enough! You should be looking for any help you can get, even if it comes from a monster! Don't you want to save the suffering people as soon as possible?"

Then there had been the events down in the underground tomb.

She had been the one to deal the final blow to the gatekeeper within, a monster that the Grave Keeper had created by fusing a demon with a divine creature. Despite her trembling hands, Izabella had laid her arm horizontally over her chest. Despite her flowing tears, she'd given it a bow.

"No longer must you be bound by the chains of your tortured existence. Your efforts guarding the tomb did not go unnoticed."

Finally, Kaito arrived at the memory of what had happened only just a little bit ago.

Izabella had stood with her back to the exploding light. Even while she rejected Kaito and the others, she'd still smiled.

"That we are, I suppose. Idiots, one and all."

The lacerations running across her pale skin had twisted unattractively.

Yet, even so, Izabella Vicker was beautiful.

She had truly been beautiful.

I... I can...

As he tried to finish thinking through his answer, though, Kaito found himself interrupted.

Crimson flower petals had begun gently fluttering around him.



Startled, Kaito felt his eyes go wide. At some point, crimson had become interspersed with the silver snowflakes dancing through the air. A violent wind broke out, and petals and feathers flew through the air as though trying to blot out the milky sky.

Astonished as he was, Kaito was reminded once more of a certain truth.

Sentiment had the power to radically change the weight of a murder. That was only natural.

But there's someone I know who's fully willing to trample their own thoughts and feelings underfoot.

She was someone who paid no heed to the wails of others, no matter how grief-stricken or forlorn they might be. And she had the power to utterly destroy her own feelings and sentimentality. The hefty sins she bore on her back did nothing to dull the resonance of her loud laughter.

Now she was standing proud and tall amid the whirlpool of crimson petals and black feathers.

She was the proud wolf. She was the lowly sow. She was the Torture Princess, Elisabeth Le Fanu.

And she was holding Executioner's Sword of Frankenthal aloft.

"How pitiful you are, Izabella. Yet, this, too, is the fruit of your resolve and dedication. Thus, I lend you no compassion or scorn. I shall simply kill you. And I shan't ask for your gratitude. Death is a fate we all wish to avoid. Even if it is the sole avenue to respite, that sentiment is one that every living creature shares."

Elisabeth's voice was cold and firm. She was arrogant, and at the same time, she knew full well what it meant to take a life. Her black hair fluttered as she began advancing, passing by Kaito in silence.

When she did, she didn't spare him so much as a glance.

She said nothing to anyone else, either. When she spoke, it was to Izabella alone.

"Resent me to your heart's content. 'Tis your right to do so."

Unhesitatingly, she looked into those blue and purple eyes. Her gaze didn't waver for a moment. Just like she'd done for Marianne and the children who'd been fused to the mass of flesh, she gazed at the one she intended to kill. At the same time, Kaito felt as though he'd been struck by lightning.

What am...what the hell am I doing?

"Go now to your rest."

"Elisabeth, wait!"

The shout escaped Kaito's lips half-unbidden. Elisabeth whirled to face him, clearly annoyed. Izabella stooped over, then let out a growl. Keeping a careful eye on her movements, Elisabeth heaved a sigh.

"What, are you going to insist that we can save her or some such nonsense? Idiocy taken to extremes can border on sin, you know."

"No, that's not it! I just need you to hold on for a minute."

Kaito tried to take a step forward. When he did, though, he realized something. Even though his thoughts were clear and level, his knees were on the verge of unceremoniously giving way.

Hina quickly rushed over to his side. She gently took his hand in hers to comfort him.

"Master Kaito, your hand... I understand what it is you're thinking. What a truly kind man you are. If you wish to do this, even though your legs tremble so, then I shall accompany you."

"Thanks, Hina. Every step I take forward is thanks to your help."

Kaito returned Hina's soft squeeze. Then, with her by his side, he stepped before Elisabeth. Awkward as his demeanor was, the Torture Princess didn't laugh at him. She simply waited for him to speak.

As he gazed at her, he ruminated on something.

Back at the entrance to the underground tomb, when he and Elisabeth had been crossing blades, what was it he'd been thinking about?

Why had he fought so hard to avoid being killed by the Torture Princess? It wasn't fear of death. It was mindless obsession.

That's right. It wasn't because I didn't want to die. It was something way more important than that.

Like hell I'm gonna let Elisabeth kill me.

Like hell I'm gonna let her kill anyone else she cares about.

That was what had been going through his mind.

Isn't that right, Kaito Sena?!

The number of people whom one could choose to save at all costs was highly limited. Kaito was well aware of that fact.

Back before he was reincarnated, he hadn't had a single person who was precious to him. That was precisely why he'd decided to fight to the bitter end to protect the ones he'd found in this life. But this demon-ridden world was harsh and cruel. His experiences in his past life had helped him learn one thing quickly: Due to his powerlessness, his arms could reach only a handful of people.

Because of that, he'd chosen to put Elisabeth Le Fanu ahead of the whole world.

He'd decided to put his entire existence on the line to save that dreadful, horrible, peerless sinner.

What, then, could he possibly have to tremble about?

"Indeed—one who forgets their greatest wish is naught but a fool masquerading as a saint."

The Kaiser had told him to trample over everyone who stood in his path. Kaito ground his teeth.

Even if Izabella's smile had been beautiful.

Even if she'd been radiant as she foolishly strode straight forward.

That was something he couldn't allow the Torture Princess to bear.

"I'll be the one to kill Izabella Vicker."

And with that, Kaito made his declaration. He squeezed Hina's hand in gratitude. Then, after tapping the back of her hand to set her mind at ease, he let go of it and strode alone toward Izabella.

The Torture Princess narrowed her crimson eyes. Hina closed her eyes, then opened them. Lute hung his head downward.

Kaito Sena raised his hand high and made to snap his fingers.

Then, right before he could, a massive silver fist came crashing into him.



"Hmm?"

"Wh—?"

"Master Kaitooooooooooooo!"

Elisabeth arched an eyebrow, Lute was dumbstruck, and Hina let out a cry.

As for Kaito himself, it took a couple of violent revolutions of his body before the fact that he'd been punched set in. He then descended in a cartoonish tailspin. A moment before he crashed to the ground, though, Hina successfully slid into position to catch him.

"A-a-a-a-are you all right, Master Kaito? I had no idea you would go popping and whizzing through the air like that, my beloved. Oh heavens, what would I have done if I hadn't caught you?"

"H-Hina... Ow, ow, what happened to me?"

"Why, it was *her*."

Confused as she was, Hina's tone when she answered Kaito's question was

filled with unmistakable reproach.

At the other end of her pointed gaze, a single individual was walking forward. Her honey-blond hair danced luxuriously.

It was the golden girl, her outfit as risqué as ever. Behind her was a steel giant. Deus Ex Machina had merged back together, and it was the one who'd punched Kaito.

Her rose eyes flickered as Jeanne de Rais looked down on Kaito Sena. When she spoke, her voice was cold.

“As the one who chose Izabella Vicker as my evangelist, getting to the bottom of her transfiguration is my duty. **Sorry for butting in just when you worked up your resolve, but I’m gonna need you to back down now. This one’s mine.**”

Then Jeanne turned to face Izabella and looked down on her transformed, monstrous form.

After slightly narrowing her eyes, Jeanne raised an arm. The steel giant squared off in response.

Spiderweb cracks splintered in the ice beneath its feet. Her voice dispassionate, Jeanne went on.

“Granting her death will be my responsibility. Arrogantly, selfishly, and self-righteously shall I lower the curtain on her life... No, my apologies. Allow me to correct myself, that I may speak the untarnished truth. Granting her death will be my *privilege*.”

Jeanne spoke with imposing dignity. Izabella offered no reply. Blood and drool dribbled from her lips, and she receded backward, as though on high guard. Jeanne watched over her calmly.

Then, eventually, the corners of her lips curled up into something resembling a smile.

“It seems the stories were true... **First loves just ain’t meant to be.**”

The next moment, Izabella dashed forward like a lion.

When she did, a steel fist crashed hard into her side.



Kaito watched over the state of the battle, still swaddled in Hina's arms. Lute opened his mouth in bewilderment, and Elisabeth crossed her arms. However, the affair before them could barely even be described as a battle.

To be more precise, it was a beatdown.

That was just how powerful Deus Ex Machina was after returning to one body.

"I suspected as much. **You didn't need to consume something like that to attain power, li'l miss.**"

Jeanne began talking to Izabella. While she did, the steel giant continued mercilessly swinging its fists.

Even if they tore or were sliced, Izabella's limbs and torso would quickly regenerate. Because of that fact, the steel giant narrowed down its attack to blunt strikes. Its fist carved a straight arc through the air. Its offensive options may have been limited, but its movements surpassed the perception of man and beast alike. Unable to avoid the strike, Izabella was dashed hard against the cold ground.

The subsequent blow crushed her body. Her bones writhed, trying to return to their original positions. As they did, her flesh loudly burst. The regeneration had been too much for her, and her ribs had popped out through her back like springs.

Lute's lupine snout scrunched up. Unable to take it anymore, he averted his eyes.

Kaito, Hina, and Elisabeth were silent as they watched the one-sided beatdown.

"Gah... Ahhh... Argh... Geh..."

Izabella violently retched. Blood and countless chunks of flesh spilled out onto the ice. For the first time, Izabella looked afraid. She dragged her broken legs along as she tried to put distance between herself and Jeanne. Jeanne gracefully approached the fleeing Izabella, steel giant in tow.

Then, with an almost terrifying calmness, she continued talking.

"Divided as they were from the titan, miss, you once managed to reach me

through Bandersnatch and Gargantua. And as you were before, you would have remained composed even in the face of Deus Ex Machina's parts combined. **So what's this sorry shit? I told you not to go, didn't I?"**

"Graaaaaaaaaaah, ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

Jeanne received a low, terrified roar in reply. Her words didn't seem to have reached Izabella.

Jeanne's rose eyes narrowed just a hair.

Izabella's entire body undulated. Her flesh was rapidly expanding.

Muscle fibers began wrapping around her still-exposed ribs. When they were finished, they'd formed sets of winglike, fleshy protrusions. Her body's damage was forcibly being compensated for, but it was impossible to completely negate the wounds from the blows she'd received.

Izabella drew back even farther. Even while she was retreating, her movements took on a frailer quality to them.

Jeanne gazed expressionlessly at the veritable wounded animal before her. When she whispered next, her voice sounded truly young.

"...I told you."

"Gah, ah, ahhh, grahhhhhhhhhhhhhh, gyah!"

Izabella recklessly leaped at the giant only to be brushed away like a flea for her troubles. The arc she painted through the air on her way to the icy ground was almost comical. Bones and flesh writhed beneath her skin once more. However, her regeneration was growing more and more chaotic. Strange convulsions ran all across her body.

Izabella managed to lift herself off the ground, enduring no small amount of pain as she did. She looked ready to leap again.

Jeanne spoke coolly, directing her words at Izabella's trembling back.

"I think that's enough, little lady. Just submit to your pitiful, tragic rest."

"Gah, ah... Gaaaaaaaaaah!"

Izabella let out a meaningless moan. Jeanne opened her mouth. Before she

could say anything, though, she showed a rare moment of hesitation. After closing her mouth and opening it again, the whisper seemed to practically spill unbidden from her lips.

“You are a leader, though perhaps only in name, no?”

When it did, Izabella stopped in her tracks. Her silver hair violently shook as she suddenly turned to look over her shoulder.

When she did, she focused her blue and purple eyes on Jeanne, just as she had once before.

“Ms....Izabella?”

“Izabella...”

Kaito and Hina both reflexively called out her name. She gave no reply. However, the light of reason had faintly made its way back into her eyes. It was fleeting, though, and ephemeral. She was on the verge of being ruled by nothing more than her base animalistic instincts of pain and starvation and the fear of death. Her face morphed unattractively back and forth.

From senseless beast to human, from human to beast.

Once her internal battle had finished, Izabella’s trembling legs set into motion. She sat down in place.

Her silver hair gently sagged as she bowed her head and went motionless.

It was as though she was asking that they cut off her head and be done with it.



“Impossible... How can this be? How can she retain her sanity even after being transfigured so?”

Elisabeth’s voice was filled with disbelief. Her words echoed Kaito’s sentiments as well.

Jeanne remained silent. Her rose eyes, though, opened wide in what could only be described as bafflement. She seldom showed anywhere close to that much emotion. The next moment, her eyes rapidly set into motion.

She cast her gaze away from Izabella, focusing it on the Grave Keeper with such intensity that sparks seemed likely to start flying out.

The scarlet-clad girl, for her part, replied to the hostile stare with a warm smile.

Seemingly having come to understand something by that, Jeanne nodded.

“I see. **So shit was weird from the start, huh?**”

That's right... Now that I think about it, the signs were there.

As Jeanne spoke, Kaito realized something. All the transformed people they'd seen had had their eyes engorged, congested with blood and sometimes even ruptured. Yet, Izabella's eyes had been just as beautiful as ever.

Coming from someone who knew what she'd looked like originally, Kaito felt the state of her transformation had seemed near-absolute. In truth, though, the degree to which she'd been transformed was probably comparatively lighter. In all likelihood, the paladins on the verge of death had had their skin melting off beneath their armor.

Kaito tumbled out of Hina's arms. He unconsciously covered his mouth.

Was it because Izabella resisted? Or...did the Church do that intentionally? Either way, she must not have eaten much of the demon meat.

But in the end, what difference did that make? The fact that she was beyond saving remained unchanged.

That was what the rational part of his brain determined. At the same time, however, a wave of discomfort ran over him.

She...should be, but... There's something off about Jeanne.

There could be little doubt that the golden Torture Princess was even more rational than Kaito was. At the moment, though, she had completely laid off the attack. She merely blinked, her rose eyes flashing.

“...This falls outside my expectations. But not yours, I suppose?”

Jeanne continued staring at the Grave Keeper as she murmured. The young girl offered no reply, instead just continuing to smile her perfectly unnatural

smile. Her gaze was affectionate, so much so that it evoked the image of a saint. It was an expression one would hardly expect to come from the one who'd birthed this hellish situation.

Jeanne turned back toward Izabella once more. Her whispered voice had a rare tone of bewilderment to it.

"It seems that I *do* have the power to save you, little lady."

"*What?!*"

Kaito couldn't stop himself from letting out a shout. As he did, Deus Ex Machina moved. Despite its considerable mass, it gave off no noise or presence as it advanced.

And then the giant ruthlessly crushed Izabella.



"W-wait, you, you just said you could save her! You said you can save her, didn't you?"

"Yes, I can save her. And this is a necessary step in doing so."

After returning to his senses, Kaito shouted out yet again, to which Jeanne replied coolly. However, it certainly didn't seem that way to him.

Deus Ex Machina slowly lifted its fist. Unsurprisingly, Izabella's body was almost completely crushed. She was just barely breathing, but now it was even harder to imagine her ever getting back to normal.

"Allow me to reiterate myself. This is sufficient. **The bits I smashed weren't necessary, see?**"

"Unnecessary?"

"Now, all I have to do is remove them."

Kaito asked his question in an uneasy tone, but Jeanne replied with conviction. His reaction was one of blank shock.

If Jeanne did that, Izabella would definitely die. After all, she would end up losing over half her body. But Jeanne unconcernedly laid out a means by which to preserve Izabella's life.

“Then we can do our best to supplement the places where the demon meat set its roots in with parts from Deus Ex Machina.”

“Wait, is that even possible?”

“It is. They’re weapons designed for combat, but they can alter their forms as they please. They can even act as human organs. However, in doing so, we would lose access to a powerful weapon.”

Kaito’s eyes went wide in comprehension. Unlike Elisabeth, who summoned her torture devices each time, Jeanne used Deus Ex Machina as a more conventional weapon. Whether or not someone could mold the mana drifting around in higher dimensions into a form suitable for combat depended heavily on their inherent nature, after all.

Deus Ex Machina was designed to circumvent that restriction. If we lose it, the strength at our disposal will invariably suffer. But...

Kaito looked over at Izabella’s crushed body. Then he turned his gaze to the Grave Keeper, who was looking at Jeanne like a shepherd watching over a lost lamb. Kaito suddenly recalled the inscrutable declarations she’d made.

“For the sake of the world, for the sake of the people, our revered Saint fell into slumber and shed tears of blood! That is what flows through the roots of the Church—her unrewarded love, her noble self-sacrifice! In the name of faith, in the name of the world, she cast herself aside! And what could that be but the most desirable trait possible for those chosen to possess! I have sacrificed everything, discarded even my ego! Can you, the chosen ones, say the same?”

“Please, show me tragic devotion befitting the favor you’ve received! Show it to me, if you’d be so kind!”

Is this what she was talking about?

It would appear that the Grave Keeper was asking them to demonstrate their devotion by sacrificing Deus Ex Machina to save Izabella. However, there were still mysteries left to solve. For example, the Grave Keeper had said that she no longer had any intention of fighting them. In other words, she shouldn’t have had any reason to want to whittle away the Torture Princess’s strength. If that was the case, then, why was she doing it?

What was the Grave Keeper's goal? As that question rattled around in Kaito's head, though, he was suddenly interrupted.

“What to do; what to do?”

A distracted murmur echoed out. Kaito's eyes went wide.

Of all the things she could be doing, Jeanne was standing before Izabella's crushed frame with her arms casually folded. Her words and demeanor made no sense to Kaito. In his mind, there was only one logical path to take.

His voice grew rough as he pointed at Izabella's dying body.

“What the hell are you talking about?! What is there to think about? You can save her, can't you?!”

“Indeed. I can save her.”

“You said she was your first love, didn't you?!”

Kaito's scream was so forceful, he risked damaging his throat. As far as he was concerned, the things Jeanne was saying were unforgivable. She had had nothing, and now she'd finally found someone precious to her. Choosing to cast her aside was a choice he refused to get behind.

He refused to approve of it. Hell, he didn't even want to try to understand it.

There's no way—not that!

A beast-like growl slipped from Kaito's mouth, to which Jeanne replied with an unfalteringly calm gaze.

When she spoke, her voice was just as calm.

“Allow me to ask you a question, then, mister. *Is that deed truly more worthy than bringing about salvation?*”

The moment she did, an answer burst forth from Kaito's brain, one that ran in stark contrast to his emotions.

It wasn't.

There was no person so valuable that saving them was more important than the entire world. That fact was the same as it had ever been. There were no exceptions. All he had to do was look over his shoulder at the corpses he'd piled

up. Giving special treatment to a single person would be wrong. And right now, the world's fate hung in the balance. Now was no time to complain or nitpick. They simply needed to do what needed to be done. That was the only correct answer.

You should know that, Kaito Sena.

Yeah, I know. I know all too well. THAT'S WHY I DON'T KNOW, GODDAMMIT!

"Screw you. Shut up."

Kaito violently repudiated the correct answer he'd arrived at. Jeanne blinked. Kaito's reply had hardly constituted an answer. Yet, in a way, it had conveyed everything.

His composure fracturing, Kaito racked his brain.

Jeanne, Elisabeth, they're all the same. All they can come up with are correct answers.

Elisabeth, the raven-haired Torture Princess, showed no signs of bearing regrets, nor did she ever try to cast aside her sins. But what about Jeanne?

If she did bear regrets, what would she be left with after the world was saved?

If she won't have anything left, then...

...then at that point, what had she really even saved?

That instant, a shout exploded from Kaito's lungs.

"Don't listen to me!"

"...Pardon?"

"Don't listen to anyone! Think about it yourself! Think about it yourself, all on your own! Don't let anyone else decide for you what is and isn't more precious than the world! You have to choose; you have to make the decision! Dammit, you, you're not thinking at all!"

"You're saying rather strange things, mister. What are you suggesting it is that I'm not thinking about?"

"You can't seriously tell me you paid a single thought to whether you'd regret

it or not!”

Upon hearing Kaito’s accusation, Jeanne cocked her head to the side. It was faint, but her lack of expression started crumbling a little.

She blinked as she replied, her voice filled with utter astonishment.

“Whether I would regret it or not? **That don’t matter for shit.**”

“Like hell it doesn’t! And the moment you couldn’t immediately say that you wouldn’t proves it, goddammit! You’re the one who brought up first love, so don’t you dare pretend you’re some robot who doesn’t know what emotions— Oh, right, this world doesn’t have robots... Anyway, don’t talk like you’re pretending you don’t have feelings! Dammit, how can you be so...how can you be such a...?”

Kaito was even more dumbfounded than Jeanne was. Unable to find the words he was looking for, he stomped his foot on the ground. Then he took a deep breath and forced himself to calm down.

The words he finally found were equal parts earnest and ill-fitting.

“How can you be such an idiot?”

“I see. How nonsensical. However, this does mark the first time anyone has ever asked me that.”

Jeanne’s whisper was quiet and subdued. She looked back over at Izabella. The convulsions running across her body were growing weaker and weaker. Yet, Jeanne refused to move, as though she were frozen solid. The heavy silence persisted.

Kaito was on the verge of wringing more words out of himself.

Before he could, though, Jeanne hesitatingly opened her mouth, then closed it again. After repeating that process a few times, she finally managed to get the words out.

“What do you think, miss, Torture Princess Elisabeth Le Fanu?”

The question had an almost desperate ring to it. Likely expecting words of rebuke, Jeanne elaborated on her inquiry to the black Torture Princess, the woman cut from the same cloth as herself.

“You consider all equally. You bear heavy sins and will someday burn at the stake for them. You refuse to betray those you’ve killed, and you obstinately continue your life as an arrogant, honest sinner. If it were you—?”

“Hell if I know. Silence. I’m tired of listening to you.”

The reply came in three curt remarks.

Furthermore, it came from a location that nobody had expected.

Everyone present turned to look. Lute, in particular, gave a heavy gasp.

Elisabeth Le Fanu was positioned in midair. Facing her target, she was holding her sword aloft.

On the other end of her sword stood the Grave Keeper, whose scarlet robe fluttered as she looked up at the Torture Princess aiming for her.

Everyone felt as though time had frozen over. The sinner and the zealot exchanged a meaningful stare.

The Grave Keeper could have easily given orders to the paladins, who were still kneeling to the side. However, she persisted in her silence. The crimson blade drew toward the pale neck, almost as if the two were destined to meet.

The moment before the sword reached its target, the Grave Keeper spoke as though in prayer.

““You are free to act as you will. But pray that God shall be your salvation. For the beginning, the middle, and the end all lie in the palm of His hand.””

Her quiet, hopeful smile had never left her face.

As the Grave Keeper spoke to her killer, her expression was steeped in heartfelt affection.

“Hallelujah.”

And with that, Elisabeth’s blade sliced through her young neck. Blood surged. The Grave Keeper’s round little head went flying through the air. It then rolled along the ground, eventually coming to a stop still draped in its scarlet hood. A pool of blood quietly gathered.

The Grave Keeper had been killed before their very eyes, and she hadn’t so

much as put up a fight.





The paladins didn't move. The way they refrained from counterattacking implied that they'd been *given orders not to beforehand*. Instead, they stood up in unison and raised their arms horizontally over their chests.

Turning to face the Grave Keeper's corpse, they bowed. Their postures seemed to be ones of mourning.

Suddenly, Kaito arrived at a hypothesis. The Grave Keeper's escorts seemed to have had a relatively high compatibility with the demon meat. Maybe that was because they'd willingly chosen to consume the meat and carefully tuned their portions.

No matter what kind of person they are, anyone with a strong will will inevitably find admirers.

Even if that person harbored nothing but madness.

Just so long as their conviction was unshakable.

"Tch, how ghastly. 'Tis my first victory to ever be so irksome."

Elisabeth landed on the ground unopposed. She clicked her tongue in dissatisfaction.

A violent wave of confusion washed over Kaito. The Grave Keeper had died, and she hadn't even tried to defend herself. And she'd probably even told the paladins not to retaliate. But why?

He had no idea what she'd been trying to accomplish.

Should we really be playing along with the Grave Keeper's scheme like this?

Plagued by his misgivings, Kaito turned to look back at Jeanne.

She still hadn't made her decision. Instead, she was looking at Elisabeth in supplication.

Elisabeth dispelled her sword and began walking. It didn't look as though she intended to give Jeanne any replies past the three she already had. The black Torture Princess passed by the golden Torture Princess.

Suddenly, though, Elisabeth came to a stop. Still facing forward, she gave a

quiet murmur.

“’Twere it I, I would ask no one. And if any dared tell me what to do, I’d lend them no ear.”

“ ... ”

“Yet, ask you did. I obtained power by killing people as they wailed and screamed. You obtained power by killing the willing. One part the same, one part different—not that I was informed, at any rate. In truth, I find it unpleasant that such a woman would declare herself Torture Princess. That is what I say to you, Jeanne de Rais, the saint, the whore, and the maiden of salvation.”

Jeanne didn’t respond. Only Elisabeth’s eyes moved as she gazed at her in profile.

When Elisabeth spoke next, her voice was cold beyond belief.

“Do as you please. ’Twere it I, I would kill her. But you are not I. And the burden of your choice shall be yours alone to shoulder. But bear no conceits—saving the world and destroying it are but mere matters of personal selfishness.”

“...It would seem both my options are cruel. **But damn, this one’s a doozy.**”

Jeanne’s voice was quiet and subdued. The ebony Torture Princess resumed walking, leaving her behind.

Elisabeth left Kaito and the others behind as well as she headed toward the Butcher. Kaito hurriedly grabbed Hina by the hand and followed behind. After looking around restlessly, Lute joined them, too.



As they ran, Kaito cast a fleeting glance backward.

Only Jeanne and Izabella remained atop the ice.

Alone, the golden Torture Princess gazed down upon the dying woman.

She gazed down upon the person who, by all rights, she should let die.

She gazed down upon the first woman she'd ever loved.

"I'll..."

Jeanne's whisper came out hoarse. Then her head flopped to the side.

For the first time, her expressionless visage shattered. With a perplexed look on her face, she let out a childlike whisper.

"...I...will?"

And then Jeanne de Rais,

the saint, the whore, and the man-made maiden of salvation, made her choice.



8

The Butcher's Story

F r e m d T o r l o r c h e n

The Butcher's Story

Kaito and the others ran atop the narrow pathway that sat between the two fissures. Bottomless abysses lay on either side. One wrong step and they would be swallowed up by the unknowable darkness.

They dashed quickly but carefully. The dark blob in the distance slowly but surely grew closer, eventually revealing the silhouette of a familiar back. In a way, it really did look lonely.

It feels kinda like he's waiting for someone who'll never come.

As he quickened his pace even further, Kaito felt a strange pressure coming from ahead. It was like a wind was blowing up from the bottom of the pit. However, the air around him didn't seem to be moving an inch.

Now that he thought about it, the snow had stopped falling as well. The atmosphere was frozen over and tense.

It felt as though the whole world were holding its breath.

I guess this really is the moment that the world was waiting for.

However, he didn't know what it was waiting for in particular. He didn't know what would happen, or what would become clear, once they reached the Saint's Apostle, either. In fact, he didn't even have proof that they'd be able to find out where the Saint really was.

Even so, he kept on running. Eventually, as he closed in on the figure's back, he called out to it.

"Butcher!"

"Why, if it isn't Mr. Dim-Witted Servant, Madam Elisabeth, and Ms. Lovely Maid! And the rest of you fine people, you're all here!"

The Butcher did a little hop. His reply was no different from normal, as though

he'd been out on a stroll and had just happened to bump into them. It was not a response anyone had expected.

Perplexed, Kaito came to a stop. Everyone else did the same. Hina's expression was just as confused as his, and Lute scrunched up his snout and made no efforts to hide his wariness. Elisabeth frowned in displeasure.

Jeanne, bringing up the rear, wore a serene expression on her face.

Not looking at the Butcher, her gaze was solidly fixed on the woman she was cradling in her arms.

It was Izabella, with more than 70 percent of her body supplemented with machine parts. She was adrift in a defenseless slumber.

The way Jeanne was carrying Izabella reminded Kaito of a statue from his old world called the *Pietà* that he'd once caught a glimpse of on television. As the Butcher looked at her, he let out a surprised cry.

"Ah, so *that's* what you chose! Goodness gracious, what a surprise! I had a hunch, somehow or other, yet it's a surprise all the same!"

"You little..."

"Humans really are intriguing creatures, I must say. They have wisdom surpassing any beast, yet at times they find themselves driven by their emotions despite knowing full well how illogical they're being. I can't say I hate that contradiction, mind you!"

"You knew this was gonna happen, just like the Grave Keeper did, then?"

Kaito's voice was full of quiet rage, indicating his revulsion and fury at having been toyed with by the two of them. However, the Butcher's demeanor didn't change. His response was clear and prompt.

"Oh no, I just heard bits and pieces of information from my little whelp. So I figured, this is what would happen if the golden, Deus Ex Machina—wielding Torture Princess butted heads with the Grave Keeper, that's all. She was quite the devout believer, after all, and she had a rather solid head on her shoulders. But, me oh my, I'm just glad that that delightful woman is all right!"

"You don't get to say that!"

“I’m being entirely sincere! Back when I was trapped in the Gibbet, she was kind enough to show me concern. Wishing death on her was the furthest thing from my mind!”

“Skip the nonsense, Butcher.”

A cold voice interrupted Kaito and the Butcher’s exchange. Slipping adroitly through the group’s ranks, Elisabeth took her place at its head. She then went on, marking the Butcher as an enemy with her gaze.

“You referred to yourself as the enemy of the world. And even had you not, this entire affair began when you sold Vlad that demon meat. Was this nonsense about restructuring your desire as well? Every creature in this world may well die thanks to you. So you can skip the nonsensical rejoicing over a single woman’s survival.”

“Hmm, I must say, calling it my ‘desire’ is really quite off the mark. But I suppose you are right.”

“Yet, at the same time, you invited us here. To what end?”

The Butcher offered no answer. Instead, he began thinking to himself and turning about idly in place. As he did, his usual cross-marked sack dangled from his shoulder. Then he began humming a strange tune.

“Oh-ho-ho-ho-ho, my meats are the finest meats around! Filled with love and bravery, they’ll never let you down! Eat them and your courage will increase one millionfold! As always, I’m your friendly neighborhood Butcher! Oh-ho-ho-ho-ho!”

“...!”

Kaito shuddered in spite of himself. The Butcher was acting the same as always. Given their current situation, only madness could account for that. And at the same time, a sort of melancholy struck him as well. It was the kind of pathos one would feel toward a clown atop a stage, the kind of pity one felt toward those who had no choice but to play the part of the comic.

Could it be that none of us has ever known the Butcher for who he really is?

“To the contrary, Mr. Dim-Witted Servant!”

Kaito's gaze had apparently been enough to convey his sentiment, as the Butcher hopped up and down in protest. When he finally landed, he thrust his finger straight toward Kaito.

"I'm overfond of tall tales, it's true, but never once have I told a lie! *Thank* you very much! Okay, well, there's a *small* chance that I might have exaggerated a bit from time to time, and I might have told a lie here and there, but... Ahem. But the kind, adorable, lovable Butcher you've all come to know and love is the real deal! It merely...wasn't *all* there was to me."

"Truth, lies, they make little difference. The point where such things mattered has long since passed."

Elisabeth offered no reaction to the gloomier words the Butcher had ended his speech with. She stepped forward, as though to demonstrate how fed up she was. Executioner's Sword of Frankenthal glittered in her hand.

"Now, I've but one question for you. Where is the Saint?"

With each step she took forward, the Butcher took one back. The heel of his foot struck a hard, frozen snowflake. It slid backward a smidgen, then was soundlessly swallowed up by the darkness. The Butcher had nowhere left to run.

Elisabeth thrust Executioner's Sword of Frankenthal toward him, then continued pressing him for answers.

"Talk. We've come to kill her. All the way here to the World's End."

"And how well you've done to make it here. Ah, the efficiency of your questions...how very like you, Madam Elisabeth."

"You'd do well to understand this, Butcher: The time for buffoonery is over."

Elisabeth's calm retort shut the Butcher down. His glib remarks came to a complete stop. Tilting his head a smidgen to the side, the Butcher let out a docile murmur.

"...It's over, is it?"

"We are those who know what goes on behind the stage. Never again can we return to the audience. Not even you would keep performing to no end, I

suspect. Isn't it about time to put an end to this farce?"

Elisabeth laid out her question dispassionately. But deep in her voice was a faint hint of sympathy, a fact that caused Kaito no small amount of shock. Hearing Elisabeth show sentiment toward an enemy was a rarity among rarities.

Maybe...maybe Elisabeth appreciates where he's coming from.

Like a faithful jester, the Butcher had continued playing out his role. But perhaps he wasn't the only one who'd chosen to become *something* instead of just being *someone*.

As he stood before the Torture Princess, the Butcher gently scratched his chin.

"I see, I see. Time to close up shop, is it? Yes, well, I suppose it is."

"It is, isn't it? And in following, enough playing around. Tell us what your duty was."

"In that case, allow me to start by sharing a serious little anecdote with you."

"Very well. Speak."

Still training her sword on him, Elisabeth jerked her chin. The Butcher nodded, then gave a bow.

Then, as though he were laying his heart bare, he began narrating.

"Did you know, Madam Elisabeth? Fairy tales are always born from the smallest of things."

"More of your tall tales, even now?"

"Destiny is much the same way, you see... The very shortest of memories can come to define a man's whole life."

Although his story seemed to have little to do with their current situation, the Butcher persisted in telling it. Serious to the last, he spoke his truth. His voice sounded strangely old and hoarse, and his tone was firm and inflexible.

Although he should have already known it, Kaito realized something all over again.

The Butcher is the Saint's Apostle.

In other words, he'd been alive since before the world had even finished forming. In a sense, he was literally the oldest person in existence. He'd lived for far too long for the word *lifetime* to even begin to cover it.

In spite of that, though, the age of the memory he was laying out hadn't worn it away in the slightest.

"Madam Elisabeth, do you have memories of your mother?"

Elisabeth replied with silence. Kaito suddenly thought back on the facts he knew. Elisabeth's parents had died in an "unfortunate accident." Right before it, though, there had been sightings of a massive black dog.

The Butcher peeked around behind Elisabeth. His gaze landed on Kaito and Hina.

"Mr. Dim-Witted Servant and Ms. Lovely Maid, what about...? No, I suppose not. My apologies. Whether or not one has such memories varies from person to person. It's neither a good thing nor a bad one. But I...I have them. Not that she could truly be called my mother, that is."

"You mean...?"

"The moment I attained consciousness in her arms, the very first things I saw... Over the course of my long, long life, not once have I ever forgotten that memory. Not once *could* I forget that memory."

The Butcher's voice was calm and quiet. Kaito sucked in his breath.

The person who created him was the Saint.

When he spoke about her, his tone remained light, but his voice grew weighty. Contained within it were hatred; grief; a vast, untarnished amount of love; and a frightening amount of passion and emotion. The scant few decades of a human's life could never even come close to attaining such sentiment, nor were they sufficient in understanding such a feeling.

The only thing capable of swallowing up the Butcher's emotions was the crystal-clear air.

At long last, Kaito realized something—why the snow had stopped and why the wind wasn't blowing.

The world is waiting for the Apostle to tell his story.

“In the end, I was but a single seed of evil. A pawn without even a name to his name. And I’ve understood that fact for a long, long time.”

The Butcher took a deep breath, then exhaled. He clutched at his tattered clothes.

Then he went on, forcing the words out of his throat.

“But I saw that smile... I saw that smile.”

Just what was he saying about that expression he’d seen?

He spoke with alarming speed as he elaborated on his answer.

“It was the smile of one who had, for the first time, obtained a companion in a desolate, lonely world. It was the desperate smile of one whose absolute solitude had been broken. In that moment, she greeted me with unmistakable love. That smile was more than enough to prove that to me. And...through her tears, she spoke...”

Then, just for a moment, the Butcher trailed off. When he spoke again, it was in a voice steeped with nostalgia for a time long gone by, or perhaps one filled with the exhaustion of countless ages.

“‘Thank you for being born unto me,’ she said. That was all. And that was enough.”

In his entire monologue, not once had he explained why he’d sold the demon meat. At the same time, though, it was more than sufficient as a confession of motive.

Because he’d heard those words, the Butcher had carried out the Saint’s mad wish.

Despite knowing that it would destroy the world, he had taken the demon meat, and he had sold it.

Kaito narrowed his eyes. The Saint’s words to the Butcher had been a blessing, one filled with joy and gratitude. At the end of the day, though, he’d spent his whole life bound by them, and they’d turned him into the entire world’s enemy.

In that sense, weren't they more like a curse, then?

Kaito was about to say as much aloud, but he stopped himself. The Butcher didn't need to be told that. He knew. Yet, even so, those few words of hers had given his whole life meaning. If they hadn't, he would have stopped walking down this path long ago. He had ascended past the point where regrets were still relevant.

Suddenly, the Butcher took a small breath. Then he set down the white bag on his back.

When he did, it made a small sound. Having cast aside the goods he'd carried around for so long, he spoke in a whimsical voice.

"I had fun, Madam Elisabeth, Mr. Dim-Witted Servant, Ms. Lovely Maid, really, truly, and deeply. The living cannot live without finding enjoyment in their days. And when I watched you all fight back, my, how radiant you looked. Yet... Yet, knowing full well how mad it is, there is a request I need to fulfill."

For that shall be the evidence of my existence, the sole proof of my love for her.

As Kaito listened to the Butcher's cryptic declaration, a certain quote resounded within his chest.

It's a nonsensical little fairy tale, and one that's gone on for a very, very long time.

Was the story a tragedy or a comedy? Kaito and the others had no way of knowing.

And how is the Butcher planning on bringing it to an end?

What was the mad request he was trying to fulfill?

Elisabeth shifted her sword vertically a hair. She asked her next question in a voice fully devoid of emotion.

"So? Where is this dear Saint of yours?"

"Madam Elisabeth, it brought me such joy when you saw fit to voice how delicious something was. Mr. Dim-Witted Servant... No, Mr. Kaito. The fact that you, a mere human, made it this far on conviction alone is something to be

proud of. Ms. Lovely Maid...Ms. Hina. Thank you for preparing my meats so exquisitely. And congratulations on your wedding.”

The Butcher’s voice was light as he obstinately ignored Elisabeth’s question.

Her irritation was about to show on her face, but at the last moment, the corners of Elisabeth’s mouth froze. Kaito and Hina rapidly went pale as well. Lute looked around restlessly. Jeanne offered no response.

Of all the people present, those who knew the Butcher well were the only ones who realized.

Kaito and Hina took off at a dash. Elisabeth reached out with her sword-free hand.

“Butcher, no!”

“The time has come to close up shop. This marks my final task as a merchant: delivering meat.”

The Butcher didn’t, in fact, stop, instead taking off at a dash himself.

The way he ran wasn’t forward but backward. Yet, nothing lay there except darkness.

“I said so, did I not? The fairy tale must come to an end.”

Kaito’s eyes practically bulged out of their sockets.

Just as he’d thought, the last thing the Butcher had said had been his final testament.

“Tch!”

Elisabeth snapped her fingers. Having seen that her arm wouldn’t reach far enough, she summoned forth a vortex of crimson petals and darkness from the air. Her aim was unsteady, perhaps due to her agitation. However, the chains just barely managed to wrap around the Butcher’s arm.

Kaito breathed a sigh of relief. The next moment, though, blood billowed forth.

“Wh—?”

“And finally, thank you so much for your many years of patronage.”

The Butcher's clawed left arm remained bound by the chains.

It, and it alone, dangled in the air.

The Butcher had drawn a knife from the many folds of his cloak, then severed his own arm. His body fell, as though it were being sucked in. Ribbons of blood followed him down as the abyss consumed him.

In the end, all that remained was that one arm.



Elisabeth stopped at the edge of the cliff. Hina came to an abrupt halt, too. Kaito, on the other hand, didn't.

His momentum practically carried him over and into the abyss. Then, with his arm still outstretched, he got ready to leap into the vast darkness. Elisabeth and Hina frantically wrapped their arms around him.

They nearly ended up slipping as well, but the two of them narrowly managed to maintain their footing. They both cried out in unison.

"Get back, you dullard!"

"Master Kaito, please step back!"

"...This isn't right."

The words tumbled from Kaito's mouth. As he scooted backward little by little, he tried to get his jumbled thoughts in order.

Not even he knew what he was trying to say. He didn't know what it was he found so wrong, so abhorrent. But then, all of a sudden, he realized what it was that was filling him with such sorrow and vexation.

"Thank you for being born unto me," she said.

No doubt it had been a happy, joyful thing. Until he met Hina, Kaito had never had anyone tell him that, either. But in the end, the Butcher had died imprisoned by his role as a seed of evil.

He'd abandoned everything he'd enjoyed, canceled out all the memories he'd collected, and swallowed up the pain of cutting away the feelings of those who'd shouted at him not to die as well as his own arm.

Could the words that had bound him really be described as love?

Hadn't the Butcher just died after being used up without ever truly being loved by a parent?

He hadn't even been able to live for his own sake.

And the Butcher would never get another chance at life.

"This isn't right, goddammit!"

Kaito screamed from the depths of his soul. Tears began spilling out from the corners of his eyes.

No matter how many times he'd lost his humanity, no matter how many times he'd tasted the pain of death, Kaito hadn't shed a single tear. But for the Butcher's sake, he cried. He let out animalistic wails. But he received no response.

Hina gently stroked his back. Elisabeth said nothing. She merely snapped her fingers. The silver chain transformed into petals, then vanished. The Butcher's arm descended, accompanied by crimson.

When it did, Kaito felt a faint pressure in his eardrums. He looked up with a start. Then he heard it.

"GRAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!"

A roar reverberated up from the depths of the pit, one that tore the heavens and cracked the earth.



The World's End quaked at the terrible cry. Following the vibration of the atmosphere, cracks began running along the surface of the ice. Spiderweb-like white patterns began polluting the silvery ground. As they did, the darkness of the abyss inverted.

Something ominous was glowing at the bottom. Upon seeing it, Kaito was struck speechless.

A massive golden eyeball was floating amid the blackness. And it was staring straight at Kaito and the others.

They were peering into the abyss, and it was gazing back at them. Eventually, Kaito realized just what it was he was looking at.

There's a monster down at the bottom.

It was a colossal creature, one that defied all reason and providence.

The monster then shifted its body, and its eye disappeared from sight. In its place, a giant jaw jutted up from the pit. As it did, Kaito understood what meat the Butcher had meant to deliver and to whom.

When he fell, he wasn't carrying his bag.

In other words, the Butcher himself was the meat.

The Butcher had delivered his own flesh to the gigantic, presumably draconic creature.

"It awakened by consuming the Apostle? What in the blazes is it?"

Elisabeth murmured, her voice low. As she did, a massive pair of wings extended up from the pit to the sky. They were like massive, fleshy flower buds reaching for the heavens. Then, like a flower blooming, the wings unfurled.

Rejecting all constraints of gravity and volume, the dragon softly flapped them and took off into the sky.

When it did, its entire monstrous body came into view. Compared to its wings and body, its limbs were comparatively stubby. It also had no scales, which was unusual for a dragon. Its pale, pinkish flesh was fully exposed. Between that and its round shape, it called a human fetus to mind. The thin red membrane swimming in the air behind its neck made it look like it was on fire.

Jeanne narrowed her eyes. As she regarded the strange dragon, she said in almost a whisper:

"Why, if it isn't the Legend Dragon, the supreme flesh drake... According to the literature, the male was hunted by a group spearheaded by the merchant of legend. That must be the female, then. **Who'da thunk it'd survived by staying out here. Now, this, *this* is a fairy tale.**"

"Man... Looks like those tall tales of yours were true after all."

Kaito muttered in disbelief. He thought back to all the stories the Butcher had told seemingly half in jest. One of those stories had been about the battle against the Legend Dragon.

Although he'd dressed them up as tall tales, the Butcher had shared no small number of his memories with them.

At that moment, though, harsh winds began to blow and knocked Kaito out of his reverie.

The Legend Dragon had begun softly bending her crooked wings again. In open defiance of her own mass, she was floating gently in the air like a balloon. She cast a vast shadow atop the icy ground as she drifted.

The way she did made her look almost like a floating island. It made for a grand spectacle, one that surpassed the realm of human comprehension.

The way her reddish flesh pulsed also made it look as though she were the beating heart of the very world.

Kaito found himself once more in the harsh grip of bewilderment.

What reason did the Butcher have to want to wake up the Legend Dragon?

He probably was planning to have the Legend Dragon destroy the world, and in doing so spur on the restructuring. Massive as she was, though, she was as docile as a whale. She showed no signs of wanting to attack her surroundings. And considering their descriptor, the reason the merchants had hunted down the male probably hadn't been to exterminate a threat but to harvest his flesh.

And the Legend Dragon just kept drifting along.

Then she slowly began turning her massive body over. Eventually, her chest entered Kaito's frame of vision.

"Wh—?"

As it did, he let out a dumbfounded noise. He finally understood why the Butcher had woken her up.

A hard crystal had been forcibly embedded in her soft flesh.

And in the Legend Dragon's chest, encased in the red crystal, something was

sleeping.

A naked woman was floating within.

She looked as though she'd been buried within a coffin suspended in midair. She was horribly defenseless, frozen upside down and submerged naked in the bloodred liquid. Its red crisply offset her white skin.

Hina held down her hair, which was being blown about by the wind. She blinked and whispered in puzzlement:

"Is that...the Saint?"

"Man... I guess it makes sense why no one could find her."

With that, Kaito nodded. The Saint had been hidden away in the belly of a sleeping dragon at the bottom of an abyss in a pit at the World's End. There was no way any ordinary search party could have turned her up.

Kaito had no words; he merely looked up at the drifting dragon. The stone in his pocket containing Vlad squirmed, but he ignored it. He didn't have time to worry about Vlad right now. The Saint they'd been seeking was floating right before their eyes.

However, Kaito didn't have the first clue as to what to do.

So what are we supposed to do with her?

The being before them was simply too far removed from mankind's sense of scale. Kaito gazed up at the shadow-casting giant and the woman lodged in its chest in bewilderment. And the Legend Dragon continued to drift.

However, it was then that the calm, peaceful atmosphere came to a violent end.

A low, merciless voice rang out.

"Reenactment of the Plain of Skewers: Impaled Victim."

Stab, stab, stab, stab, stab, stab, stab!

Innumerable crimson petals scattered through the air, and countless stakes fired out from them. The silence was shattered, and blood flew through the air.

Easily over a thousand iron stakes had buried themselves in the Legend

Dragon's body.



The air violently trembled. Kaito was certain that the Legend Dragon had let out a scream, but he couldn't hear it. It must have been at a frequency that human ears were unable to perceive.

The Legend Dragon contorted her body through the air in anguish. Stakes fell out from her trembling flesh in succession. They roared through the sky as they toppled to the ground and pierced the frozen earth. At the same time, massive amounts of blood gushed forth from the Legend Dragon's wounds.

The fresh blood pooled wide atop the ground like a lake. However, a few of the humongous drops twitched, then halted in the air. Several orbs of blood hovered in place.

"Huh?"

"Hmph."

The next moment, the bloody spheres shot toward Elisabeth. The path was narrow—she had nowhere to run.

At this rate, Kaito and the others would get taken down as well. But Elisabeth was the very image of composure. As she swung Executioner's Sword of Frankenthal, darkness and crimson flower petals spread out over the chasm.

When they vanished, they left behind a web of chains that covered the hole.

Elisabeth cracked her neck in displeasure.

"I first thought of this as I watched the Butcher fall. I must say, I'm disappointed it didn't occur to me sooner. Ho!"

Elisabeth took an acrobatic leap and landed atop the chains. Then, despite her high heels, she effortlessly dashed across their delicate iron loops. Seemingly uninterested in harming anyone except their foe, the dragon's bloody spheres took off in pursuit. The countless crimson orbs snapped at her heels like a pack of beasts.

Elisabeth weaved a graceful, nimble dance atop the chains.

As they grazed her afterimages, the blood pellets fell down. When they came

into contact with the chains, they burst into steam and then vanished into the pit.

The Legend Dragon lurched unsteadily as she let out a groan. Many of the stakes were still embedded in her flesh. In her current state, she was nothing more than a target. Kaito thought back on the story he'd just been told.

The male Legend Dragon was once hunted down by a group of merchants.

If that was the case, then there was no reason why the Torture Princess shouldn't be able to kill the female.

Grabbing a chain, Elisabeth hoisted herself upside down. After avoiding the blood that had been aiming for her foot, she arched her back and made a soft landing. Then she mercilessly snapped her fingers once more.

"Arachnophobia."

A new swirl of crimson and black appeared high in the sky. Two iron claws shot out of it.

Then, like the hands of a long-fingernailed woman, they each split into four and reached for the Legend Dragon.

When they did, they snatched her massive wings up by their bases, much like an innocent child would to a small animal. Their pointed tips dug into her draconic flesh as they lifted her high into the air.

Another violent tremor ran through the air, the echoes of an inaudible scream. Blood gushed forth and melted the icy ground.

The claws froze in the air, almost as though they'd heard the scream. They were finished moving. But the Legend Dragon's weight caused her to begin sagging. Each time she did, her wings tore from their bases where the claws remained lodged. She gradually started falling faster and faster.

Then the Legend Dragon fell, her wings shredded to pieces.

When her fleshy body impacted the ground, its weight caused the earth to quake.

Tremors ran through the World's End. This, of course, caused the skinny path Kaito and the others were standing atop to shake.

If not for the fact that they'd immediately grabbed on to the chains stretched out atop it, they very well could have toppled into the abyss. Lute collapsed onto the chains, then frantically crawled back to the path. Kaito broke out in a cold sweat and wiped it away with his fist.

"Looks...looks like we made it."

"'Twill only get worse from here, fool! Make haste!"

Elisabeth's angry voice rose up to meet him. Kaito blinked in astonishment.

As he did, he heard a faint popping noise. A chill ran down his spine before he even understood what it signified. The next moment, he discovered that his ominous premonition had been on the mark.

Fatal cracks had begun loudly winding across their narrow walkway.

Kaito looked up in shock. At some point, Elisabeth had finished making her way across the chains and had reached the side of the cliff opposite them. She was waving her arms atop the solid ground and shouting.

"Hurry! At this rate, you'll be caught up when it collapses!"

"Oh, now you tell me all of a sudden!"

"It was hardly sudden, mister. **That much weight comes crashin' down, even you should be able to put two and two together.**"

"Pardon me, my beloved Master Kaito! But I have no intentions of giving you up to that abyss!"

Jeanne was cradling Izabella in her arms and had already begun running. Kaito, on the other hand, had gotten a late start, so Hina scooped him up.

That moment, the ground at her feet shattered. As she carried him bridal-style, Kaito turned to look behind them. The path had started to crumble. The ice sounded like a mirror as it shattered.

The fragments glittered as they descended into the darkness.

Kaito succumbed to his primal fear and gulped. Hina shot forward, accelerating like a bullet.

Lute had originally been behind her, which meant that he was now in front as

they ran for dear life. However, due to the weight of his winter gear, his footsteps were sluggish. Hina caught up with him in the blink of an eye.

After thinking for a moment, she shifted Kaito to under her arm.

“Master Kaito, this may be somewhat uncomfortable, but I ask that you bear with me! And, Mr. Lute, pardon me!”

“Oh my!”

Hina reached her free arm out and snatched Lute up by his burly back. Surprised by her strength, Lute let out a little yelp. Then he reflexively flattened his ears and tucked in his tail.

The walkway continued loudly crumbling. If they slowed down even a little, the abyss would swallow them up.

“Ha!”

Hina kicked off hard against the ground. The hem of her maid uniform flared out, and the glimmering ice beneath her feet shattered. She skidded as she landed, scattering snowflakes in her wake.

The two adult men in her arms screamed. However, their screams were drowned out by a loud clattering noise.

Kaito and Lute cautiously looked backward.

The thin path between the two crevices had vanished without a trace. Now that the obstruction was gone, the two ravines had joined together like a single vast river. Beyond it was the pit with the chains stretched over the parts of it still visible.

Lute shook his entire body, and the fur on his cheeks stood up straight.

“Th-that was a rather close shave... To think that Ms. Hina would end up having to carry me. Good gracious, how embarrassing. I do thank you, though. Never shall I forget this debt I owe you.”

“Th-thanks, Hina... Seems like you’re always saving my ass, doesn’t it? Now...”

Kaito stared hard, trying to make out what was happening on the other side of the pit.

The Legend Dragon was over there, writhing in a lake of her own blood. Eventually, the fierce convulsions running through her body stopped. The red gem in her chest continued glowing unabated.

The pale woman was still sleeping inside, like an insect trapped in amber.

In a daze, Kaito thought back to what Jeanne had once told him.

“Our salvation lies in murdering Diablo, murdering God, and, yes, murdering a human.”

“Is it...is it time?”

For now, the Saint had fallen to a place where they could kill her.



As he stood atop the World’s End, Kaito Sena thought to himself.

The end was finally upon them. All they had to do was kill the Saint, just like they’d originally planned.

Ever since he’d heard the Butcher’s lonely soliloquy, every positive thought he’d had about the Saint had vanished. The very fact that the person who’d destroyed the world and built it anew still lived was unnatural.

Now, mankind would lose the Saint, and the world would avoid destruction. And they would all live happily ever after.

The fairy tale would finally end.

Will it, though?

“Now, then, I aim to proceed! Feel free to stay there, you lot; you’d be hindrances at best!”

“Please wait. I, too, shall come... Or rather, allow me to join you, Torture Princess!”

Elisabeth called out from the opposite cliffside, and Jeanne replied. Despite her expressionless visage, though, she seemed troubled as she cast her gaze down at the woman in her arms. Izabella was sleeping like a baby.

Jeanne gently stroked her mostly metal cheek. Then she whispered quietly.

“My dear little lady.”

Then, lifting her head, Jeanne looked at Lute. He’d gotten down from Hina’s arm and was currently sitting cross-legged on the ground. Jeanne slowly approached him. He quickly stood up, his fur standing on end to illustrate his wariness. Jeanne stopped directly in front of him, then quietly held out Izabella.

Lute seemed bewildered. However, his fur settled down, and he took Izabella from her.

Jeanne softly brushed Izabella’s silver hair from her face. Then she gave Lute her quiet request.

“Of the three of you, your arms seem the thickest and most comfortable, mister. I leave her in your hands. Please do not let her go. She is very precious to me. **Not that she herself knows, mind you. Hell, she’d probably find it a bother! But hey, that’s first love for ya, am I right?**”

“Precious...you say. I understand. Then on my name as Lute, I shall protect her to the last! Hmm?”

Being a devoted husband himself, Lute must have been moved by Jeanne’s words. His ears and tail sprang up as he acquiesced. At the very end, though, it seemed like he remembered the fact that Jeanne had severely wounded him not long ago.

Lute *hmm*ed to himself and scrunched up his snout. As he did, Jeanne faced him and bowed deeply.

“You have my sincere thanks.”

Kaito and Hina felt a slight shock. It was the first time they’d ever seen the golden Torture Princess act so admirably. Lute’s voice got caught in his throat for a moment before he replied with a docile nod.

“Think nothing of it. I may bear resentment toward you, but that has nothing to do with Madam Izabella. And grudge or not, I can hardly forsake another’s beloved. If you would entrust her to me, then I will see to it that she remains safe.”

“Again, you have my gratitude. **Thanks a million, li’l pupper.**”

“Learn when to stop talking, will you?!”

As Lute shouted angrily at her, Jeanne turned around and broke into a run. Hurrying toward Elisabeth, she dashed alongside the rim of the hole. Her radiant honey-blond splendor gradually grew distant. Kaito remained where he stood.

If he went, he’d probably just be in the way. All that was left was for the two of them to lower the curtain.

The Kaiser was silent, seemingly having lost interest in the way things were proceeding. The stone in Kaito’s pocket was flaring up as usual, but now wasn’t a great time to have a conversation with Vlad.

Kaito’s gaze was fixed firmly on the woman within the red jewel.

She was still far away, but thanks to the Legend Dragon’s collapse, she was now a good deal closer. She looked utterly defenseless. All they had to do was kill her, and the nightmarish turmoil regarding the world’s restructuring would finally come to an end.

Will it, though?

However, doubt still welled up unbidden in Kaito’s mind.

All of a sudden, he noticed that his heart was palpitating strangely. Sweat was dripping from his entire body. Discomfited, he lost track of his thoughts. Then he pressed down against his forehead.

“Master Kaito? My dear Master Kaito, whatever is the matter? Your face is ever so pale.”

“No, no... I’m fine. It’s nothing... I think it’s nothing.”

Hina worriedly stroked his brow. As he felt the soft sensation of her fingertips, Kaito replied. Deep in his mind, though, his childish self was asking his rational self an innocent question.

Will it really, really, really, though?

No, you’re right. Something’s off. But what?

Kaito couldn’t really put his finger on it. But his discomfort raged on, beating

incessantly against the inside of his skull. He found himself lost in the strange sensation. It wasn't that he wanted to stop them from killing the Saint. At the moment, it was the correct choice to make. But something was off.

Will this really, really, really bring everything to a close? Do I really believe that?

You're a big dumb-dumb! his inner child crowed.

Think about it carefully, the rational part of his brain murmured.

And now that he considered it, there were a number of questions that he and the others had more or less ignored.

Why did the Grave Keeper bring Izabella to us like that? Why did she give Elisabeth her blessings, then offer no resistance and practically kill herself off? Why did the Butcher invite us here? Why did he specifically wait for us to arrive before waking up the Legend Dragon?

Then, upon noticing another fact he'd overlooked, Kaito went pale.

The various races had each received a letter, and in the letter had been a certain phrase.

"The beginning, the middle, and the end all lie in the palm of His hand. If you wish to reject those words, make for the World's End."

But we were the only ones the Butcher didn't send it to.

Perhaps that fact signified something truly terrible.

And at the same time, a question he had failed to consider up until then crossed Kaito's mind.

The Butcher had claimed that the whole uproar about restructuring hadn't been his desire. The Apostle and the fanatics had simply been trying to grant the Saint's wish. But had anyone ever said that the restructuring itself was what the Saint had been wishing for?

That fundamental problem now pierced through Kaito's brain. He frantically dug through his memories.

That's right—it was the Grave Keeper!

She'd said that *"God and the Saint have been seeking this restructuring for many ages."* But was the restructuring itself really her true desire? Wasn't it also a possibility that the reconstructing was simply a natural part of the process involved in granting her true wish?

If that was the case, though, then *what did the Saint actually wish for?*

"Ah!"

At that moment, Kaito's thoughts were forcefully interrupted. An incredible amount of heat was coming off the stone in his pocket. He was about to click his tongue in annoyance, but then he realized something.

Vlad's never been this insistent about wanting to come out before.

So what could it be that Vlad wanted to tell him?

Kaito hurriedly ran mana through the stone. Azure petals and black darkness fluttered up through the air. When they vanished, they left behind a man in aristocratic attire. Unlike usual, he didn't move to strike a dramatic pose.

Vlad's limbs dangled loose as he turned to face Kaito. Upon getting a look at Vlad's crimson eyes, Kaito gulped. Fierce madness and burning thoughts were swirling within Vlad's gaze.

"...Why?"

"Um..."

"Why did you so obstinately refuse to let me out until now, my dear successor?"

"M-my bad. I had no idea you actually had something you wanted to tell me."

"Well, what's done is done. And perhaps it's fine. I've yet to get all my thoughts in order."

Vlad ignored Kaito's apology and began mumbling to himself. He clutched at his raven locks like a man possessed. As he ruined his normally impeccable hairdo, he started laying out his thoughts.

"If one is lost, they need but retrace their steps. Where did the malaise originate? Right, from the Grave Keeper's words and deeds. It seems that we've

all been dancing atop the Saint's palm. Since when, though? The golden Torture Princess was created to stave off the restructuring. Was that part of her design? Or was it not?"

Another chill ran down Kaito's spine. That wasn't something he had even considered.

There were those who'd worked to bring about the restructuring and those who'd worked to prevent it. What had the Saint thought of each of the groups?

"When the alchemists created their golden Torture Princess, they were aware of the black Torture Princess and used her as a reference. However, there was no need for there to be two of them. The alchemists could just as easily have gone to the ebony Torture Princess and sought out her aid. They hadn't expected her to exist, and they chose not to rely on her. They had their pride, after all; it was the sole end their clan had been living toward. Instead, they tried to have their golden Torture Princess take the black Torture Princess on as a follower, and in doing so make it so their creation was the primary force to prevent the restructuring. But what if, say, she anticipated their pride?"

"If the Saint predicted that another Torture Princess would be created... Then what?"

"Then there would be 'two.' The Grave Keeper even said it! What we need to pay attention to is the resulting number!"

Vlad shouted like a madman. Hina reacted to his menacing demeanor by positioning herself in front of Kaito.

Kaito, shocked, ruminated on what the Grave Keeper had told him.

"The fact that the whelp served as a guide was proof. The fact that he sought 'two' was proof."

"In the end, those who sought to prevent the restructuring and those who sought to bring it about arrived at the same method—'finding the Saint.' And the Butcher said that the black Torture Princess's resistance was unexpected. Up until she arrived, he probably was simply aiming for the world's restructuring. But if his objective changed upon the arrival of the black Torture Princess and the creation of the golden Torture Princess that accompanied it, if it took on a

form closer to that of the Saint's true desire... Oh, oh, that's it!"

"What is?"

"The 'significance of the two.'"

Vlad's eyes widened, and his words served as the trigger that set Kaito's thoughts into overdrive. Why had the Butcher, and the Saint, needed two people? What was the meaning behind that number?

What will happen when she assembles those two unbelievably powerful women? What will she be able to do?

Kaito spun around. Elisabeth and Jeanne had just reached the crystal. The two of them smoothly raised their arms, and gold and crimson flower petals began swirling.

As he gazed at their elegant backs, Vlad spoke in a hoarse voice.

"The two Torture Princesses. God and Diablo."

Kaito didn't fully understand what those words signified, but their ominous nature was all too clear. Vlad's murmur had an almost prophetic ring to it. Dull as he was, Kaito could understand that much. Something irreparably wrong was happening, here and now. And once it occurred, it could never be undone.

It was something he had to stop at all costs.

"Stop, stop, run, get away from there! *Elisabeeeeeeeth!*"

Kaito screamed, driven by impulse alone. His voice tore violently through the still, quiet air.

Elisabeth's black hair fluttered as she turned. Her beautiful crimson eyes landed on Kaito.

Her expression was annoyed, confused, and a little bit listless.

It was the same face as it had always been, yet, for some reason, it seared itself into Kaito's eyes.

And then, suddenly, something grabbed her wrist from behind.

Kaito was sure of what he'd seen. Two white arms had extended out from the red crystal.

Fingers so pale that they seemed almost dead wrapped tightly around the ebony and golden Torture Princesses' wrists.

Elisabeth's and Jeanne's eyes opened wide. At some point, the surface of the crystal had turned soft and blurry and begun vibrating. After the arms came out, they were followed by a head.

The woman slid out from within the crystal as though it were birthing her. Then she toppled awkwardly to the ground. She shook her head, spraying red droplets around her. Kaito immediately realized: They were the tears that had been running down her cheeks.

The Saint then lifted her head. The whisper that came from her lips had a strangely sweet echo to it, and it traveled like a wave, reaching all the way to Kaito.

“Ahhh...you've finally come.”

My new Saints.



*

It was a declaration pregnant with unfathomable madness and a terrifying degree of volition.

In the next instant, crimson and gold flower petals began pouring out from her palms. The two hues swallowed up the Torture Princesses.

Elisabeth tried to summon a torture device, but petals rushed at her hands and lips, sealing them off. Jeanne's eyes began wandering. She was searching for Deus Ex Machina. Right now, though, it was serving as parts of Izabella's body. No longer could it come to its master's aid.

"I see. This falls outside my expectations."

As she murmured, Jeanne gave a faint laugh.

Those proved to be her final words.

The crimson and gold petals completely engulfed the two Torture Princesses.

Even so, the naked woman refused to release their wrists. Red, capillary-vessel-like tubes tore as she wrenched even the tips of her toes free from the crystal.

Now fully free, she looked up and parted her lips.

Her rows of startlingly white, well-formed teeth came into view.

"Ha-ha... Ah-ha-ha-ha, *ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!*"

The Saint began laughing uproariously. The sound of her mad laughs tore through the air.

As he shuddered, Kaito got ready to level an attack at her. However, he stopped. He couldn't sense any power coming from the cackling woman.

She's just...a normal woman.

She had already transferred the things that had made her into the Suffering Saint.

She'd transferred them into the two Torture Princesses.

The next moment, Kaito heard a voice deep in his eardrum. Hina pressed

down on her ears, and Lute gave a small yelp.

It was being conveyed in every imaginable language, in the words of men, of demi-humans, of beastfolk, of animals, of fish, of bugs, even in languages from other worlds. It was transmitted to every living creature in a mysterious form they could all comprehend.

The voice belonged to one who'd been sleeping far, far away, deep in the bowels beneath the Capital.

"Good morning."

Kaito understood on instinct alone. Freed from its contractor's order, the first demon had vanished from its cradle.

And when it had, it had transferred into the body of its new contractor: Elisabeth Le Fanu.

◆◆◆◆◆ How the Stupid Sheep See Them ◆◆◆◆◆

God ◆◆◆◆◆

The being who creates the world. Once dwelled within the body of the Suffering Saint; reconstructed the world and brought forth the current world of man.

Diablo and the Demons ◆◆◆◆◆

The being who destroys the world. Can only interfere with the world of man once God has abandoned it. However, there is an exception if they're fused with a contractor. They corrupt the forms of their contractors but grant them vast power. Diablo, who has the power to destroy the world, has yet to manifest.

The Saint ◆◆◆◆◆

The woman who once sheltered God within her body. The mother of all creation. Sacrificed herself for the sake of her children. The "Suffering Saint." More honorable than any other being.

Someone's Murmurs

"Say, the 'me' in the stories spreading throughout the world is totally different from how I really am. If that's the case, though, then someone else could have just borne it from the beginning to the end. Then why was it me? Why wasn't it you?"

"I can feel it keenly. Who has the right to condemn me? Certainly not you all. You don't know anything. You don't even try to learn."

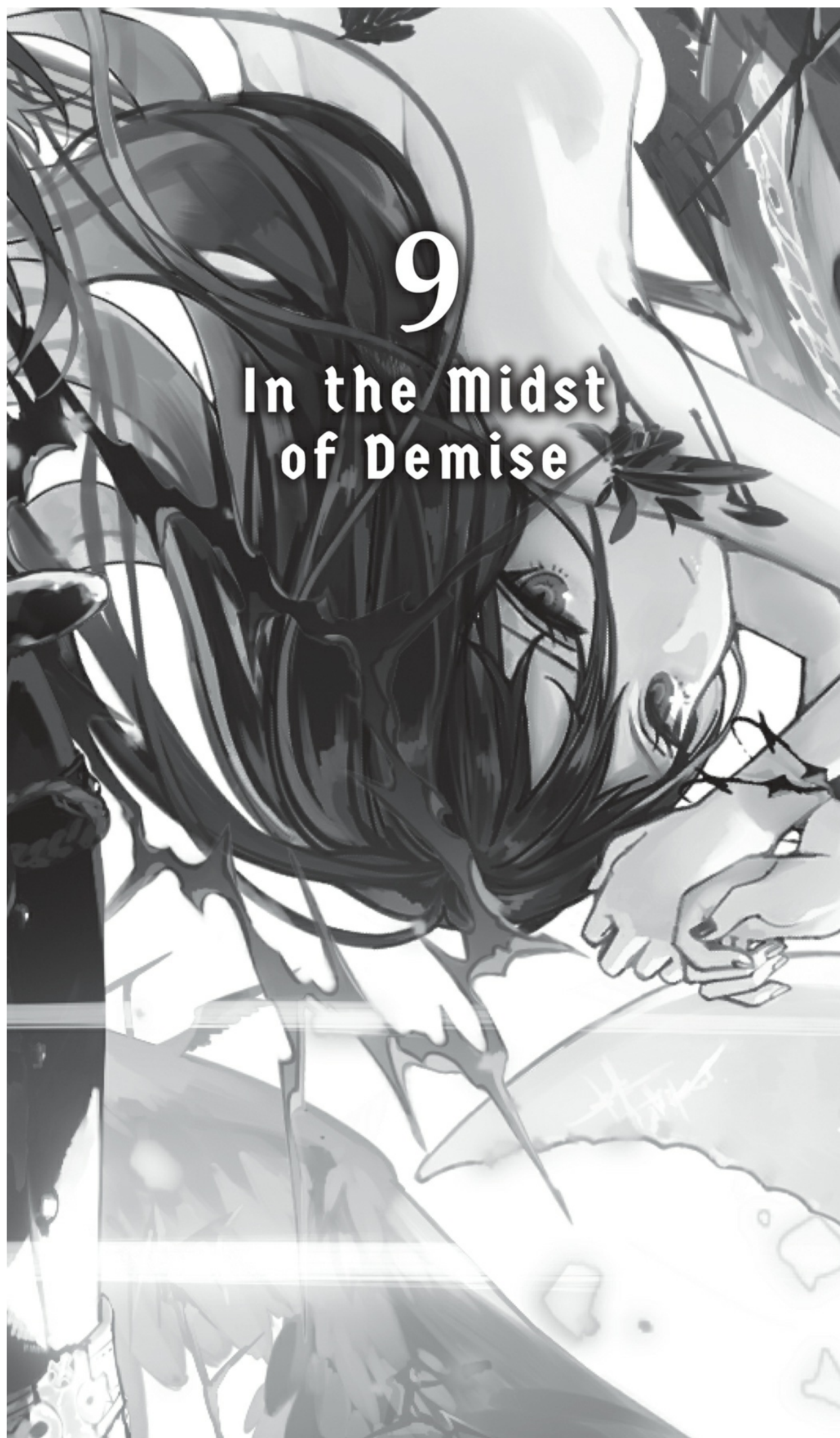
"I'm not the Saint. I'm not the Suffering Woman. I'm not someone worthy of respect. I'm just a simple sinner. Just another lunatic."

"Yet, even so..."

"I've been alone for so long."

9

In the Midst
of Demise



In the Midst of Demise

His voice solemn, Vlad began speaking.

It was no fairy tale. The entire situation had been a farce.

“It all began when the Butcher sold me the demon meat entrusted to him by the Saint.”

With that, the man responsible for part of the world’s reconstruction had set the ball in motion.

By eating the demon meat and collecting the pain of others, Vlad had been able to summon the Kaiser. Then he’d gathered up other people who wanted to summon demons and guided them on their ways. And the demon army fourteen strong had arisen.

At that point, the Butcher’s goal had simply been to have the mighty band of demons overrun the world, then to wake up the Saint once the world was in a state where she could wield the power of restructuring. The reason he’d picked Vlad was likely because Vlad had both the power and the inclination to unify the demons. But then someone had appeared, someone who opposed his dreadful plot.

The woman who’d eaten demon meat, tortured her people, and obtained the power to fight back.

The Torture Princess, peerless sinner that she was—Elisabeth Le Fanu.

Under the orders of the Church, she had begun hunting the fourteen demons.

After hearing that Vlad had been captured, the Butcher had made his way to Elisabeth’s side, then taken stock of the situation.

At around that time, another faction had made their play as well: the alchemist clan that had hidden themselves away long ago. Knowing that the

first demon would appear, they devoted many generations to working toward preventing the world from being reconstructed.

Upon seeing the fourteen demons run rampant, they realized that the time was upon them and used the ebony Torture Princess as a reference to create the golden one. However, the fact that their pride and obstinacy led them to entrust matters to their own masterpiece instead of giving the raven-haired Torture Princess their support proved to be a fatal blunder.

Once the Butcher learned of the two Torture Princesses, he changed his plan in order to take advantage of the alchemists' goal and use it against them. After inviting the Torture Princesses to the World's End, he sacrificed himself to bring them face-to-face with the Saint. The Grave Keeper, having sensed the Apostle's plan, got to work as well, and the two Torture Princesses were left with no way to avoid being captured.

And then, finally, the Saint used them as exceptional vessels, transferring the contracts with God and Diablo she bored into their bodies.

"What, then, was the Saint's true wish?"

The Butcher had originally been following the Saint's orders and trying to bring about the world's restructuring. At the last minute, though, his objective changed into transferring the contracts binding the Saint over to them. But those contracts were too much for the Torture Princesses to withstand. Within the next ten days or so, the world wouldn't even be reconstructed; it would simply meet its demise.

"Given all that, we can deduce that the Saint's objective wasn't the restructuring itself. In all likelihood, she merely needed the world to sustain fatal damage from the demons before she could wield God's power. Only at the time of restructuring could she awaken with the ability to use both God's and Diablo's powers as she pleased. And that would also be the only time she could abandon their strength."

If she abandoned her contracts during the restructuring, when the world was still a blank canvas, everything would undoubtedly perish. But in exchange, she would attain a brief moment of freedom. But by transferring her contracts to the Torture Princesses, she would stretch that moment out into nearly two

weeks.

In short, *that was all there was to it.*

“She cared little for her own survival, nor for the fate of the world. She merely wanted to set down her burden, even if but for a moment. There was nothing more to it, I’d wager.”

She intended to cast aside all the blame and responsibility she’d once shouldered. Back when she’d been carrying out the original restructuring atop the blank canvas of the world, loathing toward all of creation and fear of her own deathlessness must have swelled inside her and eventually turned into madness. That was why she’d set up a time bomb in the new world she’d created.

“The Butcher worked ceaselessly toward bringing about that promised day, deftly manipulating us all the while.”

While Vlad laid out his theory, Kaito didn’t offer a single interjection.

His head was nestled in Hina’s lap, and the rest of his body was lying atop the solemn stone floor.

They had already left the World’s End. Now they were back at Elisabeth’s castle.

Hina, Lute, and Izabella were resting in the castle’s owner’s empty bedroom. Lute, still cradling Izabella in his arms, didn’t stir. He seemed absentminded. The Kaiser had yet to show his form.

Vlad was floating in front of the three of them. His legs were crossed gracefully, and he was silent, his lecture now complete. Kaito remained on his side, not saying anything. Beads of cold sweat were welling up on his forehead. His teeth were clenched tight as he tried to endure the waves of pain coursing through his body. Every few minutes, he lapsed into violent coughs and spat up blood.

As Hina wiped the blood away so it wouldn’t flow back into his trachea, she stroked his brow.

“Please, Master Kaito, get ahold of yourself. Oh, whatever am I to do...?”

“Are you quite all right, my dear successor? Or did perhaps my explanation go to waste?”

“...Don’t worry...about that... I heard...it all—Gah!”

Kaito let out another pained cry. Hina helplessly mopped the sweat off his forehead.

Kaito tried to suppress the pain gushing from within him so he could think Vlad’s explanation over. As he did, another thought faintly drifted to the forefront of his mind. It was what he’d been thinking about as Jeanne wavered over her choice.

Elisabeth, the black Torture Princess, showed no signs of bearing regrets, nor did she ever try to cast aside her sins. But what about Jeanne?

If she did bear regrets, what would she be left with after the world was saved?

If she won’t have anything left, then...

...then at that point, what had she really even saved?

This was no doubt an example of someone who’d erred in their choice, just like he’d said.

The Saint had carried out restructuring while unable to cast aside her regrets. And because of that, she’d dragged the whole world in and crumbled it. No person could become the Suffering Saint out of a sense of duty and obligation alone. But...

She doesn’t deserve my sympathy. Screw sympathy, and screw her, goddammit!

Spitting up another mouthful of blood, Kaito scratched at the stone floor. His fingernails split as he roared within his head.

GIVE ME MY ELISABETH BACK.

There was, of course, no way that his scathing, soundless scream could reach her. The World’s End was distant. However, a different voice rose up as though in reply.

The cliff-top castle was surrounded by trees and far from any human settlements. Yet, in spite of that, screams and laughter filled the air around it.

However, it wasn't humans that the voices were coming from.

The world outside had become a living hell.

Demonic underlings laughed as they soared past the window. One monkey-like underling peeked inside.

Kaito's eyes were still closed as he snapped his fingers. His blade swung precisely, cleaving off the underling's wings. It let out a loud scream as it began tumbling down. In the space of an instant, Kaito forgot all about it.

Elisabeth...

As he continued coughing up blood, his thoughts turned to the events that had just occurred.

The gut-wrenching spectacle played out once more before his eyes.



First, the petals engulfing Elisabeth and Jeanne all vanished. The two of them suddenly found themselves free. And at a glance, their bodies seemed the same as ever. Their faces contorted in confusion.

Then, though, without warning, the horrible transformation began.

"...Rgh!"

"What's the matter, miss? I—Ow!"

A single strand of dark-red blood had begun running down Elisabeth's shoulder, and the same had happened to Jeanne's arm. It was like they'd each been stabbed with a sharp needle. But no one had attacked them. Their skin had been impaled by something hard and pointy yet, at the same time, also soft from within.

A black feather peeked out from Elisabeth's skin, and a white feather did the same from Jeanne's.

It was immediately clear that something was wrong. After all, feathers had just sprouted from human flesh.

“This is...”

“...Impossible.”

The two of them exchanged a glance. But they didn't have time to leisurely discuss the phenomenon assailing them.

Accompanied by a loud popping noise, another feather protruded out from each of them.

It was as though the two of them were down pillows, and their stuffing was bursting through their cloth. Feathers began tearing out from within them, one after another. Streaks of red blood once more made their way across the Torture Princesses' bodies.

Kaito was struck with an ominous premonition. A moment later, that premonition came to pass.

Pop! Pop! Pop, pop, pop, pop, pop, pop, pop!

Pop!

Just hearing it was enough to evoke the image of goose bumps rising up in succession. The patterns of erosion resembled vegetation budding. Feathers began sprouting from all over their bodies, like carelessly strewn seeds indiscriminately tearing apart the earth. They flew out from their cheeks, their backs, their eyes, their lips, and even their gums.

Elisabeth's and Jeanne's bodies wordlessly writhed. They were clearly in incredible pain. In the blink of an eye, the two Torture Princesses had come to resemble newborn chicks.

Elisabeth and Jeanne were being forcibly turned into something foreign.

The moment that fact hit him, Kaito recovered from his state of shock. The same seemed to be true of Hina.

Letting out loud cries, the two of them dashed forward.

“Elisabeth!”

“Lady Elisabeth!”

“Stay awaaaaaaaaaaaaay!”

When they did, they were met with a bestial roar.

As she rebuked them, Elisabeth coughed up blood.

Kaito and Hina reflexively froze in place. The next moment, the countless feathers sprouting from the Torture Princesses extended with explosive force, each one of the black and white quills growing to massive proportions. Then the two sets merged together, and they formed a pair of contrasting wings. However, the wings slumped to the ground, unable to support their own weight. They writhed there grotesquely.

Eventually, they gave up on trying to fly. Instead, the two damp wings pushed off against the ground like a set of arms. At their center, Elisabeth and Jeanne rose into the air.

Then, supported by the inverted wings, they hung there, suspended.

As they did, crimson and gold flower petals began gently descending. They spread out through the air, as though they had come to replace the no-longer-falling snow. As he gazed upon the cruelly beautiful spectacle, Kaito's eyes widened.

The petals were pouring out from within the Torture Princesses' lips.

Several of the thin red and gold sheets wound together, taking on the shape of full flowers and decorating Elisabeth and Jeanne. Then thorny briars wound around their bodies like snakes, binding their masters' bodies and refusing to let them go.

Finally, the thorns wrapped around their heads like crowns.

The two of them hung in the air, crucified. They looked almost noble.

And at the same time, they looked like sinners, kings who lorded over all of creation.

The Saint still hadn't stopped laughing. With her maddened fit as a backdrop, Kaito was reminded of what the Grave Keeper had said.

"Hallelujah."

So this transformation's what she was alluding to?

As he watched the changes the two Torture Princesses were going through, Kaito came to understand just how outstanding of a vessel the Saint had been. The fact that she'd been able to put Diablo to sleep, shelter God within her body, and still maintain her human form was nothing short of a miracle. In truth, her ability to keep the two of them from running amok was a feat so impressive, no words could do it justice. But now, she'd given up on doing so, and the result was the scene before them.

Whether he wanted to or not, Kaito immediately understood. What he was looking at was calamity incarnate.

Those two pillars of black and crimson, white and gold, would bring about an end to everything.

There's no way... The world can't just be ending before my eyes...can it?

For the first time in over a decade, Kaito was struck by an urge to scream and cry at his own powerlessness. The despair of it all made him want to just topple to his knees, tremble, and start wailing. Terror that no living creature could overcome seized him and refused to let go. But Kaito gritted his teeth and forced down all those emotions. He took a step forward. When he did, Hina called out in a panic.

"Master Kaito, you mustn't! It's dangerous!"

"I know that. But I can't just watch this happen."

Wallowing in terror and despair would accomplish nothing. Even in the face of his all-encompassing demise, he refused to stand by powerlessly and grieve. After all...

...Just who is it in the middle of all that?

Kaito looked up high in the sky. A single woman was hanging there, her eyes closed.

The person who'd saved him, the girl who had laughed so innocently, was being crucified.

She wasn't the Saint. In the beginning, she hadn't even been the Torture Princess.

She was Elisabeth Le Fanu.

The woman Kaito Sena admired most.

“Elisabeth!”

Kaito screamed her name. Then, after shaking off the trepidation running through his body, he dashed toward the pillar.

Because Kaito knew something. Screw terror. Despair? And the end of the world? So what?

The thought of losing you is way scarier than any of that.

Kaito Sena had sworn that, until the day he died, he would stay by Elisabeth Le Fanu’s side.

And he had no intention of breaking that promise.

Kaito finally arrived at the base of Elisabeth’s pillar. He reached out to grab one of the briars winding around her wing. His skin tore, and pain shot through his body. It felt like he was clutching at barbed wire. But he didn’t let go. Lifting his feet up onto the briar, he began trying to climb the wing.

His beastly hand and his human both ran red as he tried to get closer to the captured woman.

“Elisabeth! ...Rgh!”

Suddenly, the feathers and thorns proliferated, nearly swallowing Kaito up. At the last moment, though, someone yanked him backward by the nape of his neck and saved him. Kaito was about to call out Hina’s name. But he was mistaken.

When he turned around, he found someone wholly unexpected there.

“...Kaiser?”

“Your foe may be the eminent Diablo, but so long as you are my contractor, I forbid you from allowing yourself to be unceremoniously consumed, O unworthy master of mine! To think, though, that it would come to this... I’d stayed on the sidelines, thinking the situation trifling, but this, truly, is proof that I was a fool! Ah, how vexing!”

As he bayed, the Kaiser flung Kaito into the air. Then the supreme hound vanished. Hina, who'd rushed up close, barely managed to catch Kaito. Large tears were welling up in her emerald eyes.

Because she'd understood how he felt, she'd been too slow to stop him.

She squeezed him tight with all her might.

"Master Kaito, I know how you feel! I...I, too, desperately don't want to let Elisabeth go! But please, you have to endure it. You're so wounded..."

"Hina... I'm sorry. I just..."

As he rubbed Hina's back, Kaito took another look at their surroundings. At some point, Vlad had moved over to where the two pillars stood. His arms were spread wide, and his eyes were glittering as he gazed at the Torture Princesses' transformations.

"It's magnificent... It's the peak of beauty, the apex of ugliness... Truly, 'magnificent' is the only way to describe it."

His face was as innocent as a child watching a meteor shower. However, his expression suddenly took a more serious turn.

As he began rapidly coming back to his senses, Vlad started thinking.

"...Still, though... Hmm..."

While he did, the Torture Princesses continued transforming. Their engorged wings and briars slipped down under the icy ground, eroding it away. The milky-white sky quickly grew muddied as well. The rainbow film froze over into a leaden gray.

The God and Diablo pillars spread out their arms, ever wider, ever farther.

"Is this...the end?"

Hearing a trembling voice, Kaito looked down. Lute was cowering on the ground, his tail completely curled up. However, he was holding Izabella firmly.

Humans' sensory perception was weak, so the visceral despair Lute felt was probably many times greater than theirs.

Words tumbled weakly from Lute's mouth as he stared at the growing horrors

before them.

“At this rate... At this rate, everything will come to an end. How can we stand up to such a thing?”

Lute's right.

Kaito agreed with him. God and Diablo were both taboo entities, beings that mankind wasn't meant to come in contact with.

Both of them transformed the land into a place wholly uninhabitable by living creatures, as though it were only natural for them to do so. Eventually, the very world would crumble, unable to bear the strain.

The two pillars grew at a steady pace. However, they suddenly quavered, and the transformation came to a temporary halt.

The briars writhed, and a trembling arm thrust its way out from each pillar. The Torture Princesses had forced their bodies to move. Their eyes still closed, they tore at what bound them, their own skin and all.

Then they raised their arms high, and their soundless voices rang out.

Begone from this place. Make haste.

Please run, Fools.

At the same time, they also snapped their fingers. Black darkness and white light flashed, and crimson and gold flower petals started raining down.

They then formed a cylindrical wall with Kaito and the others at its center. A teleportation circle was being etched in the ice.

“...!”

On impulse, Kaito tried to dive out of it. He needed to remain by Elisabeth's side. However, he found himself unable to move. One of Lute's arms and both of Hina's were holding him back.

Normally, when Kaito's violent emotions reached a certain threshold, he would return to a sound state of mind. However, the situation was so abnormal that that function of his was broken. He raged like a wounded beast and screamed.

“Let go of me! Elisabeth is—I can’t just leave her alone like that!”

“I understand your loyalty and affection for your master, I truly do! But even if you hate me for it, I won’t let you go! What do you hope to accomplish by staying here? Think of your wife!”

“But—!”

“...Master Kaito, please listen to me.”

Suddenly, Hina whispered, her voice gentle and calm. She wasn’t crying anymore.

Her beautiful, clear emerald eyes were fixed on Kaito alone.

“If that is your answer, Master Kaito, if you say that that is your sole wish, then I will release you.”

“Ms. Hina?”

“But if you do, then *I will remain here as well.*”

Hina made her declaration calmly. Then she gently unbound her arms to tell Kaito that the choice was his.

Kaito gulped. Hina took a step back, then smiled at him.

“It would be my pleasure to remain with my dear Lady Elisabeth and die alongside you, my beloved.”

There was no reproach in her eyes and no anger. Only pure, unadulterated love.

If Kaito wanted to stay behind, then she would no doubt die at his side without a single word of regret.

And because of that, Kaito stopped. Because of that, he was able to stop.

Then he deliberately took a long, deep breath. The strained energy that had built up in his body dissipated. He went limp, then collapsed backward. When he did, Hina made sure to catch him.

As he lay in her arms, he let out a weak murmur.

“...I’m sorry. I’m good now. God, I’m supposed to be your husband, but I—”

“It’s no matter. Anything you hold precious is just as precious to me.”

Hina gently stroked Kaito’s head. As he clung to her warmth to maintain his sanity, Kaito’s thoughts turned.

Right now, there’s nothing we can do here. We need to get a fresh start.

At this rate, the world really would end. The leisurely time for the various races to stay on guard of one another and probe for advantages was over. Right now, they needed every person possible to pool their power together so they could come up with a countermeasure.

And that was why Kaito and the others needed to leave. The world needed people who had witnessed the horrible truth. Right now, information was of the essence. As those thoughts swirled around in his head, Kaito looked up through the interweaving light and petals.

At the far end of his vision sat Elisabeth’s tragic figure, her eyes closed.

“Wh...?”

Even so, part of him still wanted to run to her.

Hina seemed to have sensed something as she released him from her arms. Kaito tottered a few steps forward. Then he extended his bloodstained hand to the edge of the teleportation circle and let out a fitful shout.

“Don’t go... Don’t go, Elisabeth!”

The hell do I mean, “Don’t go”?! We’re the ones leaving!

As he shouted to Elisabeth, he shouted at himself internally. He was the one fleeing, not her. Even knowing that, though, he couldn’t stop the nonsensical words from pouring out of his throat.

“You’re the one who called me, Elisabeth! You’re the one who called me to this world! You ordered me to become your servant, didn’t you? And you’re gonna go anyway? You’re gonna go off all on your own anyway?!”

Blood dripped down his fist. Tears dripped down his cheek.

Weeping with all his might, he screamed again.

“Please, Elisabeth, don’t leave me! I don’t want you to go!”

Kaito reached out his hand as he pleaded with the person he could no longer reach.

“Please don’t leave me,” he implored her like a child. “Not now that I’ve finally met you,” he cried.

“I’d rather watch the world get destroyed than lose you!”

Then, at the far end of his vision, Elisabeth opened her eyes.

“...Huh?”

For a second, Kaito doubted his sight, thinking it nothing more than a fanciful delusion. But it was true. Her crimson eyes were assuredly focused on him. Her lips silently moved. What poured out from them was blood. In what no doubt caused her a great deal of pain, she contorted her lips into a smile.

And when she did, she whispered.

“.....You utter fool.”

It was a heartrending, nostalgic voice.

Elisabeth then reached out her trembling arm, as though trying to grasp Kaito’s palm in reply.

Briars wound around it, trying to stop her. But Elisabeth resisted them. She extended her hand straight forward. But Kaito’s palm was too distant. After displaying another abrupt smile, Elisabeth lowered her arm.

Instead, she now snapped her fingers once more. Her fingers broke. Their skin tore, and their bones fractured.

Yet, even so, her whispers had a strange warmth to them.

“You don’t want this; you don’t want that, eh? Well, if you despise being alone so badly, then I shall grant it to you.

’Tis my loss, O peerless fool. I give unto you my everything. Do with it as you please.”

Crimson petals flitted through the air, then coalesced into a sphere. It soared away from Diablo’s pillar and floated gently through the sky. Then, all at once, the petals rushed between Kaito’s lips. His mouth filled with the sharp stink of

rust and the taste of flesh.

Understanding intuitively what it was, Kaito widened his eyes. He looked up at Elisabeth.

Her voice unimaginably kind, she went on.

“Drink them down or spit them all up, the choice is yours to make. But do try to live on, Kaito.

And when you do, save the world. Your strength is equal to the task, as is your needless determination.

You are the greatest fool this world has to offer—and you are my dim-witted servant, my pride and joy.”

Her voice sounded almost like someone trying to cheer up a dejected child.

Kaito stared straight at Elisabeth. Then, with a gulp, he swallowed the petals down.

The moment he did, he clutched at his chest, and his knees crumpled. He began violently heaving up blood.

“Master Kaito!”

“S-Sir Kaito!”

“Geh... Urgh, ugh, gah, geh, blegh!”

As he heard Hina and Lute cry out, Kaito collapsed in pain. Despite that, though, he looked up. He was weeping and coughing up blood, but he looked straight at Elisabeth. He lifted his trembling arm.

Then he stuck his thumb up to say, *Don’t worry. I received it.*

Both of their faces were haggard, but they exchanged a smile.

Elisabeth, having used all her strength, closed her eyes back up.

In truth, she’d probably hit her limit long ago. She quickly lost consciousness. Jeanne’s eyes were still closed as well. However, the teleportation circle activated automatically. Kaito and the others had their vision covered by compound walls of crimson and gold, darkness and light. In the final moment before the world faded away, though, Kaito witnessed something.

The pillars had begun undergoing even more radical change. A flock of black birds took off from Diablo's.

To be more specific, they weren't birds at all. They had a variety of shapes and forms, but every one of them was an underling.

Amid the growing tempest of pain raging within his body, a thought crossed Kaito's mind.

Oh man... The world's gonna become hell, isn't it?

And the way things were going, everything was going to end.





“We need to inform Lady Vyade Ula Forstlast of what we’ve learned.”

Back in Elisabeth’s castle, Lute gave a quiet murmur. Odds were good that his subordinates had made it back safely and given their report on the chaotic situation, but Lute was the only one of them who’d seen the pillars up close.

He needed to go give an accurate report. It was now clear that he hadn’t just been in a daze—he, too, had been thinking hard.

“If things continue on like this, the world really will cease to exist. I can’t simply sit quietly and wait for it to meet its end. We’ll need to get in contact with the demi-humans...the humans, even, too, and come up with a plan together.”

Lute squeezed Izabella tight. She was still asleep, blissfully unaware of what was going on. He gazed at her mechanically supplemented face, then whispered so as not to wake her.

“And as for Ms. Izabella Vicker, I was thinking of leaving her in my wife’s care. The two of them are on good terms, and as her body is right now, Ms. Izabella might be in need of my wife’s skills as a healer. I can promise you that no harm will come to her under my wife’s watch. Does that sound reasonable?”

“Yeah, that sounds good. It would probably give Jeanne some peace of—Geh!”

While he was replying, Kaito heaved up even more blood.

Lute’s eyes went wide with alarm. The amount of red liquid spilled out atop the stone floor was far from normal.

Can humans really survive after losing that much blood?

Lute found himself bewildered. He’d been told that Kaito had a homunculus body, but even so, he still needed blood to maintain his existence. Now, though, Kaito was down on his hands and knees, and Hina was rubbing his back. Lute called out worriedly to the back of Kaito’s head.

“Sir Kaito, what’s the matter? Ever since we returned from the World’s End, you’ve been coughing up blood incessantly. Are you certain you’re all right?”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m fine... I’m fine. I’m getting used to it. I’ll get better at it soon.”

“Better at what?” wondered Lute. But before he could ask, strange noises drowned him out.

Skree!

Scraaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaw!

One of the noises was high-pitched, and the rest were monstrous. Upon inspection, it was a group of underlings chasing around one of the Church’s communication devices. All of them, the white orb and the winged, boar-headed underlings alike, were charging toward the castle.

Lute frantically leaped away from the window. As he did, their assailants all flew into the bedroom.

After carefully setting Izabella down on the floor, Lute drew his sword. Kaito was in no state to fight, and Hina no doubt wanted to stay by her master’s side. Lute steeled himself to face the group of foes on his own.

The time has come for me to repay the debts I’ve incurred!

As that thought raced through his mind, Kaito, who was still down on the floor, weakly raised his arm. Then he snapped his wounded fingers.

“La (become).”

And with that, ten blades appeared in midair.

Dozens of silver flashes filled the air. Each of the blades had silently traveled across the room several times.

The underlings were sliced to ribbons. Their diced-up flesh toppled to the ground, and their organs all spilled out.

Faced with that overwhelming display of power, Lute found himself at a loss for words. Still holding his sword at the ready, he stared at Kaito in astonishment. Kaito himself hadn’t even watched his foes die. He was down on his hands and knees, coughing up blood once more.

Lute was overcome with shock. Hina was at a loss for words, too. Only Vlad laughed.

That was just how abnormal Kaito's deed had been. As he was normally, it would have been wholly beyond him.

Without power on par with the Torture Princess's, carrying out that kind of unilateral slaughter would be impossible.

"Sir Kaito, what in the world—?"

"Over here... C'mon, over here. Good boy."

Kaito raised his bloodstained, beastly arm, and the rescued communication device obeyed his summons and landed on his palm. Its feathers then tumbled off, revealing its glossy surface and the unencrypted runes thereon. Historically, Kaito hadn't been able to read them. Now, though, he nodded casually and rose to his feet.

"Perfect. It was a message from the Church... Looks like Vyade Ula Forstlast is already putting stuff into motion off the reports your men gave her. And the demi-humans who were at the World's End went home and started mobilizing, too. Underlings are sprouting up all over. And because of the initial info the returnees brought back, the Church is getting bombarded with reproach and mistrust. The message was about a summit the three races are planning on holding together. Looks like things are moving fast, which is good. Sounds like at least someone over there knows what they're doing."

Kaito laughed. When he did, though, blood came gushing from his mouth. His black uniform was stained a wet crimson.

As blood dripped all over his body, he righted his posture. Then he chucked the communication device to the side. The violence of that action seemed strangely reminiscent of Elisabeth.

"The funny thing is, the sender was La Christoph. Which is weird, 'cause there's no way the Church hasn't written off Elisabeth as a traitor. For him to send her a message, man, he must have had some pretty strong thoughts about Izabella getting locked up. Hell, he even sent us coordinates. And hey, if we've got an invitation, it'd be rude not to go, right?"

"Go? Where to?"

"The summit, where else? Time to crash a party. I'll handle the teleportation

circle.”

That was just one more thing he casually mentioned that he wasn’t supposed to be able to do. The soles of his shoes loudly clapped as he began walking. The long hem of his uniform flowed out behind him. At some point, its inside had been dyed scarlet.

Then, his voice the very picture of composure, Kaito made his bold statement.

“We’re going to a conference about how to keep everyone alive. Let’s walk in with our heads held high, ‘kay?”

Demi-Humans

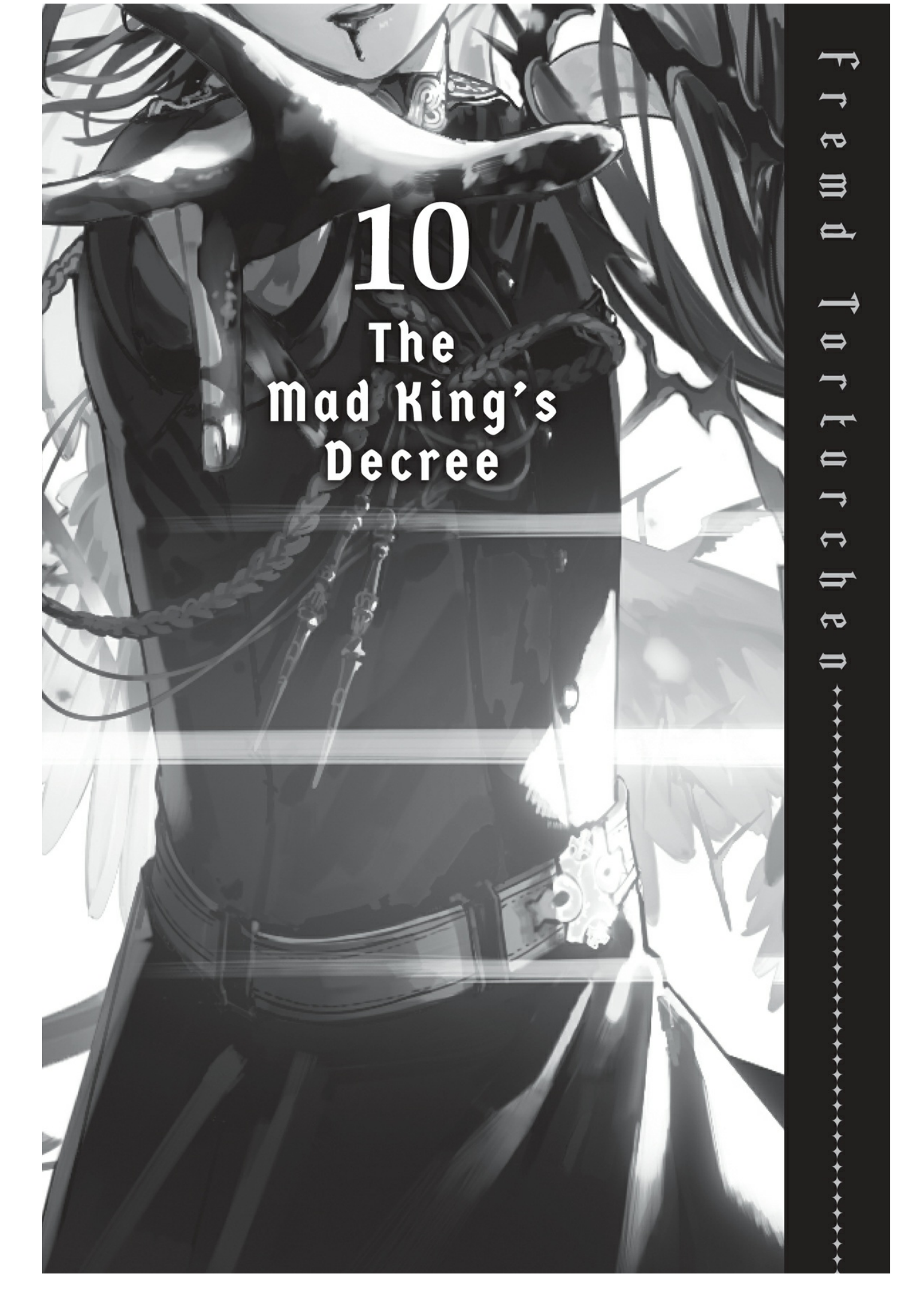
A race of reptile-headed people born to and raised by the Desert Queen the Saint created. The Desert Queen has long since passed, and pure-blooded demi-humans are growing rarer and rarer, so they're more insular and more obsessed with blood purity than the beastfolk. They've maintained a friendly relationship with the humans ever since the third peace treaty, but the demi-humans are divided into sectors based on the purity of their blood, and they rarely leave their own territories. Other than the beastfolk, they tend to avoid proactively interacting with other races. (A large number of their crossbreeds live in the human lands, but the demi-humans by and large don't regard them as "true" demi-humans.)

Beastfolk

A race of animal-headed people born to and raised by the three progenitor kings the Saint created. The three kings of the forest yet live, and they were the ones who appointed the imperial family who governs the beastfolk. They've maintained a friendly relationship with the humans ever since the third peace treaty. They also provided aid to those who suffered in the demon attacks, and they've continued interacting with the humans in a number of ways, including politically and economically. However, an extremist faction looking for an opportunity to turn against the humans and seize their lands is gaining traction within the imperial family. (A large number of their crossbreeds live in the human lands, but the beastfolk by and large don't regard them as "true" beastfolk. That said, they also recognize them as being distinct from demi-humans, so there have been cases where half-breeds who met certain conditions have successfully petitioned to be allowed to cross the border into beastfolk lands.)

Humanity

A race that was created directly by the Saint in her own image. Currently ruled by a royal family, to which the Church, which preaches devotion to the Saint, has long held close ties. Humanity possesses both the largest amount of territory and the strongest military force of any of the races, making them the de facto rulers of the world. However, the assault of the demons, who prey on the suffering of God's creations, has caused them serious damage. While they've never gotten into an all-out war with the beastfolk or demi-humans, they have had their conflicts, ranging from issues of territory rights and discrimination to a number of bloody incursions. Ever since the third peace treaty, though, they've maintained friendly relations with the other two races.



10

The Mad King's Decree

F r e a m d T o r l o u r c h e a n

The Mad King's Decree

Mankind's royal castle had gotten caught up when the demonic mass of flesh had attacked the castle, and it was currently still destroyed.

In fact, the Capital as a whole had sustained serious damages, and the plans to rebuild it hadn't even been fully formed yet.

Even so, if one was to compare the relative strengths of humanity, the beastfolk, and the demi-humans, humanity firmly held the edge in both land ownership and military might at their disposal. Normally, out of consideration for that fact, the Church's headquarters would be offered up as an alternative. At the moment, though, mistrust of the Church was surging within the beastfolk and demi-human ranks. As a result, both races had vetoed humanity's proposal.

As a compromise, the Three Kings' palace was chosen as the meeting place.

At Kaito's suggestion, Vlad had temporarily hidden his form, and the other three of them headed for the palace.

Using the coordinates that the communication device had left for them, they carried out their teleportation. Azure flower petals rose up, formed a cylindrical wall, then collapsed. Lute squinted as he looked up at the palace's familiar form, and Kaito let out a cry of admiration.

"Damn, that's impressive."

"That it is. We strive to live in harmony with nature, and the greatest manifestation of that belief is the Three Kings' palace—the World Tree."

Lute puffed up with pride as he spoke. While he was too polite to say it out loud, he no doubt considered the Three Kings' palace to be far grander than humanity's royal castle.

It was a colossal tree, towering before their eyes.

It was ancient, and the tree in its entirety was releasing sacred energy. Because of that, the underlings would have a difficult time getting near. Its gnarled branches blotted out the sky, their cracked bark so stiff, it was hard to imagine anyone living within it. In truth, though, cavities and tunnels ran freely throughout the World Tree's interior. It almost resembled an ant nest. Not only beastfolk but humans, too, were able to move about comfortably within its confines. The Three Kings lived in its lowest layer, beside the lake that seeped out from the World Tree's base.

Having received word from Vyade, the gatekeeper led Lute and the others inside.

Under normal circumstances, only beastfolk who'd gone through special screening were allowed to stay within the World Tree. At the moment, though, it was crowded with people from every race. Those who hadn't been allowed in the meeting chamber could be seen all over the place.

Several beastfolk and demi-human soldiers were enjoying their rare reunion and exchanging ardent handshakes. A group of exhausted paladins were keeled over atop chairs of mushroom. There were people wearing executioner-like outfits, too, staring forcefully at their surroundings. The demi-humans in front of them were meeting their gazes head-on.

"Yeesh, looks like everyone brought more people than they know what to do with. And they say *three's* a crowd."

Despite the tension in the air, Kaito strode forward as casually as if he was going for a stroll.

With every step he took, the unrest around him grew stronger. Even battle-hardened soldiers receded in shock as he passed by them. The wariness and animosity they felt toward him were all too clear.

Who in the world is that? What are they? they all wondered.

That spoke to just how abnormal Kaito Sena currently was. Not only was he covered in blood, but he was clad in determination so thick, it was visible. And yet, in spite of all that, he was utterly calm. Some of the people around him even recognized Kaito as the Kaiser's contractor. But not one of them could work up the courage to cry out and stop him.

Behind him, Lute trembled in concern.

He's clearly no ordinary human... I mean, he was always the Kaiser's contractor, but now... Just how did he change so absolutely?

As he gazed at Kaito's imposing stature, Lute narrowed his eyes.

He seems almost like...the Torture Princess herself.

Knowing nothing of Lute's doubts, though, Kaito just kept casually walking.

Suddenly, some of the onlookers called to Lute.

"Captain! Thank goodness you're all right!"

"Why, it's you all!"

It was the subordinates he'd parted from at the World's End. After the rejoicing over their successful reunion, Lute learned a few new things. For example, the Three Kings weren't planning on attending the meeting. They'd said that they had no intentions of leaving their rooms upon the coast of the lake by the World Tree's base. They seemed determined to continue their policy of not reigning or governing.

Just like always, they were leaving the meeting in the imperial family's hands.

"I see. It's not that I don't understand how the Three Kings feel, but..."

"Yeah, it doesn't fill me with confidence."

As Lute mumbled beside him, Kaito spoke assuredly. In truth, Lute felt the same way. And the entirety of Vyade Ula Forstlast's private army no doubt shared the same misgivings. After all, there were loud voices among the imperial family who sought to expand their borders.

The meeting had probably already taken a hairy turn.

On their way to the meeting site, Lute and the others took a small detour and dropped by the hospital ward.



After flying off from the World's End, the underlings had laid waste to everything in their path.

The damage the humans had suffered had been especially severe, but the beastfolk imperial family's villas had come under attack as well. Because of that, all of Vyade's medical staff had taken refuge in the World Tree.

Lute rushed into the room his men had pointed out to him. When he did, the space he found himself in was filled with flowers whose aroma served as a disinfectant. A large number of beds were systematically lined up, and an alarming number of them were occupied.

Vyade's personal army had been away, so her court ladies and gardeners had suffered serious injuries.

Lute ground his teeth as he lamented his absence. One after another, however, the wounded sat up and called out to him warmly.

"Sir Lute, congratulations on your safe return."

"Quick, someone, someone call her over!"

He frantically called out for a particular healer. However, the goatwoman with her mouth covered by a sanitary cloth prioritized treating the page before her. After reaching a stopping point, she stood up, then calmly walked over to him. Her voice sounded disaffected, but anyone who knew Lute's wife could make out the notes of affection in her tone.

"I was sure you'd be all right, but to see you so thoroughly uninjured is rather pleasant, Lute. It looks like I married a good one... I suppose your return can hardly be considered flawless, though."

"Of course, Ain, I would never dream of worrying you by getting injured. But I...I've seen things. I need to go give my report to Lady Vyade Ula Forstlast. While I'm doing that, could I ask you to look after Ms. Izabella?"

"Izabella? Ms. Izabella Vicker? I am rather fond of her, true, but wouldn't the Church's healers be better equipped to—? Oh, goodness."

Lute had silently held out Izabella to her. As she gazed at Izabella's half-mechanized body, Lute's wife, Ain, immediately sensed just how complicated the situation was.

She nodded, then turned around. Her voice was as matter-of-fact as her steps

were quick.

“She looks to have burned through a great deal of her stamina. Let her rest here. There you go, gently.”

Lute followed her orders and set Izabella down on a bed in a quarantined section of the ward for the severely injured. Now they wouldn't have to worry about anyone seeing her mechanized body.

Ain then quickly got to work inspecting Izabella all over. After checking her esophagus and making sure it was functioning properly, she poured a decoction down her throat. Then she started applying ointment to the places where metal and skin joined together.

After a little while, Izabella's breathing grew steady. With a kindly look on her face, Ain stroked her mechanized cheek. Then, though, she suddenly whirled around and stared straight at Kaito.

“That should put Ms. Izabella at ease for now, but...you don't seem quite well, either, do you?”

“Who, me? I mean, I guess I'm covered in blood, but I'm not really injured anywhere. Thanks for your concern, but I'm fine.”

“It isn't a matter of being injured or not. You seem like yourself right now, yet, at the same time, you seem like someone else.”

Lute gasped a little. He, too, had thought the same thing, but he hadn't been able to bring himself to ask Kaito about it.

Ain's gaze stayed firmly fixed on Kaito. Not flinching, she probed even deeper.

“I can't quite put it into words, but...I find that fact rather alarming, no?”

A heavy silence descended upon them for a moment. Kaito blinked. Hina looked down but said nothing.

The tension caused Lute's tail to puff up. A few seconds later, though, Kaito burst into laughter.

“Ha-ha-ha, you and me both. Man, Lute, you found yourself a good wife.”

“Errr, yes, I'm more than aware... Ow, Ain, don't step on my feet!”

“Now is hardly the time for that kind of talk, dear. And as for you, you’re certain you’re all right?”

“Yeah... I mean, you’re right. But I’m fine... I’m still me, after all.”

Sir Kaito is dodging the question.

Lute could feel it. Perhaps Kaito realized it, too, as he gave an awkward smile. Upon seeing it, Lute felt a slight tinge of relief. That good-natured expression was undoubtedly Kaito Sena’s.

Suddenly, a thought crossed Lute’s mind.

Perhaps... Perhaps I ought to make sure to remember that smile.

It would be best if he made sure to remember it, no matter what happened.

He didn’t quite know why, but Lute was certain of that.



After leaving the temporary infirmary behind them, Lute and the others began making their way toward the meeting hall once more.

Eventually, after traveling down a long, wide hallway, they reached its sole set of double doors.

The doors were made from a part of the World Tree itself, and flowers associated with the Three Kings and the various members of the imperial family were delicately carved into its surface. Two muscular lionmen stood in front of its gorgeous design.

Upon seeing Lute, the doorkeepers saluted. As they did, they crossed their spears and firmly barred the door. One of them called out briskly to Lute.

“Excellent work, Captain Lute. Lady Vyade Ula Forstlast told us of your expedition. However, the conference has already begun. We cannot allow any to enter, no matter who they may be. You can give your report after the meeting is complete. Until then, you can make yourself at home in the antechamber.”

“What, it started already? Hey, perfect!”

Before Lute could reply, though, Kaito poked his head out from behind him.

When they saw his bloodstained figure, the lionfolk gatekeepers' expressions contorted in bald suspicion.

"Wait, who is—?"

"La (take a nap)."

Kaito snapped his fingers. When he did, a pair of small blades quietly appeared behind the two gatekeepers, then slammed into the backs of their necks. Concussed, the two of them toppled wordlessly to the ground.

As he rushed over and caught one of them in his arms, Lute directed a quiet shout Kaito's way.

"Sir Kaito, what do you think you're doing?! There's no need for such violence!"

"Don't worry. I controlled it well, if I do say so myself. They'll be up before you know it."

His voice calm, Kaito reached toward the doors. As he did, Lute suddenly noticed the other collapsed figures throughout the corridor. Evidently, Kaito had dealt with all the patrolling guards in the same manner.

All in that one moment?

As Lute tried to come to terms with that fact, he suddenly heard the sound of meat sizzling.

Panicking, he looked back toward the doors. When he did, he discovered that smoke had billowed up from Kaito's hand as he'd grabbed its handle. Despite the fact that his own flesh was burning, though, Kaito wore a thin smile on his face.

"Damn, that's a decent barrier they've got going on. But still, for it to be able to burn me... I must be more wounded than I thought, huh?"

In the blink of an eye, Kaito's hand had been hideously burned. Its flesh was seared and its skin was peeling off. Yet, he still held on tight. Hina made no move to stop him. Sizzling blood and bodily fluids ran down the door's handle.

Around it, azure petals and darkness raged like a storm.

Then the sound of something splitting rang out.

When it did, the door exploded open from within.

The gazes of everyone present—human, beastfolk, demi-human royalty, aristocrats, and clergymen alike—all fell onto Kaito.

“Scuse the interruption. Here I am, the Torture Princess’s representative.”

Kaito, for his part, replied with a savage, villainous smile.



Practically everyone present was utterly dumbfounded. Vyade Ula Forstlast and La Christoph merely nodded, though, as if they’d seen this coming.

In the next moment, a number of swords were noisily unsheathed and pointed Kaito’s way. The guards had all drawn their weapons at once.

Their response was prompt, as one would expect. At the same time, one of the Church’s high priests called out.

“Such insolence! What business could the Kaiser’s contractor possibly have with us?!”

The guards’ murderous stares bore down on Kaito. As they did, a shrill noise filled the air.

One after another, the guards’ sword blades and spearheads went spinning into the air. Hina’s halberd was magically enhanced and glowing blue, and she’d used it to lop them off. After fully swinging it, she stooped down low like an animal.

Then she calmly looked up. The guards were frozen in surprise. She turned her jeweled emerald gaze on them.

“You people have no idea. No idea what he gained. No idea what he lost. Such insolence.”

Her voice was quiet and cold. Faced with her stern demeanor, everyone else gasped in fear.

As they did, Kaito loudly clapped his hands together. After getting everyone’s attention, he spread his arms out wide.

“Now, if you would all be kind enough to settle down. La Christoph sent me a message about this meeting, and Vyade knows me as well. Furthermore, I serve the Torture Princess, the strongest weapon at the Church’s disposal. I feel like that qualifies me to be here. I’m not gonna leave, but I’m also not gonna get in your way. Feel free to carry on.”

Kaito casually rattled off the names of the authority figures he was acquainted with.

Lute’s face went pale, and just as he’d suspected, accusatory glances rained down on the parties in question. However, the third imperial princess of the forest and the astoundingly resolute saint replied nonchalantly.

“I ordered Lute to inform me of what happened at the World’s End. The events that took place there were the root of all evil, the reason we find ourselves gathered here today. If he deems Kaito Sena a necessary witness, then I stand by his decision.”

“It’s true. I did, in fact, send for the Torture Princess. After the uproar at the plaza, it became evident that she and Izabella Vicker discovered something down in the depths of the royal tomb. Afterward, the Grave Keeper mobilized the paladins and set off for the World’s End. They should be able to clear up the suspicions the demi-humans have leveled at us, and as such have an obligation to testify.”

Their responses were met with a number of angry bellows. Despite the turmoil, though, Kaito flippantly snapped his fingers. Azure petals and black darkness swirled. This time, it was the mages who stood at the ready, but all he did was create a chair. It was the exact same extravagant chair as the one Vlad had summoned in the past. Kaito took a seat.

Then he haughtily placed his arms atop the armrests and crossed his legs. When he spoke, his voice was utterly devoid of fear.

“Go ahead, carry on. The world’s gonna get destroyed if you don’t hurry, right?”

Kaito’s words had a certain truth to them. Furthermore, the sole present saint had endorsed his attendance. And in any case, it wasn’t as though they had any way to expel someone powerful enough to destroy the barrier.

The room gradually settled down. Then, reluctantly, they resumed the meeting.

And thus, the Kaiser's contractor, the enemy of humanity, was added to the discussion that would determine the fate of the world.



"It's true, we have no time. Those two pillars sprouted up at the World's End, and the underlings coming from the black one are destroying everything in their path. At this rate, all our people will perish. Given the current situation, the chances that the restructuring the Church is so fixated on will actually take place seem rather low."

"...What, that's as far as you guys have gotten?"

Upon hearing the beastfolk official's speech, Kaito muttered to himself. Apparently, the Church was still placing their faith in the restructuring. But when he thought about it, he realized that he and his group were the only ones to have talked with the Apostle or seen the Saint's madness firsthand.

It was no wonder that there were those who viewed the appearances of the two pillars as a divine miracle and a sign that the restructuring was imminent.

Consequently, the meeting had reached an impasse. The discord between humanity and their Church and the other two races was only getting worse. Even now, the high priest was objecting to the official's proclamation.

"You people don't share our faith, so you may find it difficult to understand. But we know that the promised day spoken of in legend is at hand. The devout faithful will be welcomed into the new world. You all may lack that qualification, but I'd ask you to kindly avoid gnashing your teeth and referring to it as the end."

"I see. Then let's suppose that the current situation is, in fact, part of the restructuring you all are so keen on. Can we then take it that this is what you wanted, that you were the ones who brought this about?"

The next individual spoke in a thorny tone. Kaito turned to look at its source. It was a foxwoman with silken red fur and a beguiling smile spread across her face. Upon hearing her antagonistic response, Vyade called out to reprove her.

“Dear sister, shouldn’t we be less concerned with carrying out investigations and more with coordinating our strategies?”

“Be quiet, would you, Vyade? What do you think we stand to accomplish if we don’t know who’s to blame? And we have such a convenient intruder, too. Perhaps it’s high time I divulge a piece of information I’ve been keeping.”

The woman’s voice dripped with honey. She was likely the first imperial princess, the one who was focused on expanding the beastfolk territories.

The men’s clothing that she wore suited her well. She leaned back in her chair, then crossed her legs in the same manner Kaito had.

“We’ve already heard from the demi-humans about the horribly transfigured paladin corpses they discovered. As it so happens, they weren’t the only ones who did.”

“...What are you getting at?”

“Immediately after the underlings started appearing and Vyade gave her report, I dispatched several elite members of my private army to the World’s End. Over two-thirds of them died, but their results were more than satisfactory. They brought back the corpses of several transformed paladins, as well as a cackling woman. I don’t know much about the woman, but it’s interesting, isn’t it? It all reeks of the Church’s involvement.”

“...!”

The members on the Church’s side were visibly shocked. But it wasn’t because the first imperial princess had called them out. As far as they were concerned, the restructuring was already under way. Having their wrongdoings pointed out would hardly affect them at this point. But the captured woman, on the other hand, was a different story altogether.

If she really was the Saint, then it meant that the Church had had their most revered person stolen away by the enemy. But that wasn’t how the first imperial princess interpreted their distress. Her smile deepened triumphantly as she went on.

“If this situation, if the appearance of the two pillars, is the result of you people seeking restructuring...then how exactly do you intend to make

reparations?”

“My sister is right. It feels like compensation is in order. You know, as a show of good faith.”

A youthful voice called out in assent. It belonged to a young man with a panther’s head. He was probably the third imperial prince. His radiant sapphire gaze turned on the members of the Church. A stuffy voice piped up from his right.

“That can wait. We can figure out where the onus for reparations lies after the situation has been settled. Right now, we need to focus on how to stop the underlings from harming our people. The Church has several saints at their disposal. Depending on how they have them act, we ought to consider lessening their punishment.”

“Oh man, aren’t we feeling generous to the people who got us into this mess.”

“The pureblooded among my people number few, and one of their crucial sectors has sustained damages. Our primary concern is quickly coming up with a defense strategy for it.”

“...So he’s just hung up on his pureblood nonsense.”

The bespectacled lizard-headed demi-human’s words drove Kaito to mutter to himself again. Lute mirrored his exasperation. None of the other demi-human representatives seemed to have complaints, but surely there were other things they should be more concerned with defending.

Amid the quarreling, the human king was merely trembling in his chair. Just as Kaito had heard, the man was decidedly young.

The king’s face was freckled and stiffened from nerves. His advisers, who all looked to have close ties to the Church, were practically glued to his sides. La Christoph, who was sitting a little way off to the side, was the next to speak.

“We’re currently conducting an investigation into the abuse of power by some of our members. And it’s impossible to say definitively whether or not the current phenomenon is an aspect of restructuring or not. I believe that a pragmatic strategy would be for us saints to act as a shield and serve as a front

line to defend all three races. I would ask that you all please lend us your strength.”

“...That’s as far as you guys have gotten, too?”

Kaito heaved a heavy sigh. As he’d suspected, the Church hadn’t completely abandoned the possibility that restructuring would occur. But while they were deliberating, people were dying all over the place. The world was coming to an end, filling to the brim with pain and screams. However, it seemed like that fact had yet to sink in with anyone present.

“Lute, you were there when the two pillars arose at the World’s End. What information do you have for us?”

Vyade finally called out to Lute. He responded by giving a flustered salute.

Her decision had been a good one. Right now, what they needed more than anything was accurate information. It was essential that they understand that they were atop a collapsing cliff, that the pot they were perched in had already reached a boil.

“Allow me to first say this—there is no chance that restructuring will occur.”

Lute was firm in his statement. The room buzzed with frenzied murmurs. The Church members’ faces were blotted red with rage. But Lute ignored all the criticism being leveled his way. He calmly relayed a description of the events he and the others had witnessed.

“First, regarding what Sir Kaito and his group discovered beneath the royal tombs...”

One by one, he laid out the insane truths. The hall steadily grew quiet as a different type of tension filled the air.

“...Then the Saint transferred her contracts with God and Diablo over to the Torture Princesses. Her objective was...”

...to abandon the role she’d been burdened with.

The moment those words left his mouth, the sound of the round table being violently struck echoed through the room. The Church’s people had angrily risen to their feet.

“Hold your tongue! We will not sit here and listen to these vile insults! What merit does the testimony of a man who accompanied the Torture Princess and the Kaiser’s contractor have anyway?!”

“If you can’t show off your power, you’re just weak. If you fight without information, you’re just a fool, and if you whine pointlessly, you’re just incompetent. And hey, if your life has no value, you’re no better than a pig. So which one are you? Incompetent or a pig?”

A well-projected voice served to cut off the clergyman’s angry tirade. Kaito’s sounded almost listless. One of the high priests was about to raise his voice in objection, but at the last minute, he froze. Kaito’s eyes were cold and hard. He gave the man a quiet warning.

“Now, listen until he’s done.”

“Errr, well, I have more bad news, unfortunately. The damage from the underlings isn’t the only threat. Within ten days or so, the two pillars will collapse. God and Diablo will both be released, and the world will be destroyed.”

“Yes, and that will herald the start of recon—”

“Seven days.”

Kaito interrupted the priest once again. Every eye in the room turned toward him.

Once they had, he nimbly raised a finger and matter-of-factly made his proclamation.

“The Diablo pillar will only last seven days. That’s as long as Elisabeth’s mana will take her.”

“But, Sir Kaito, Vlad... Sir Vlad said it would last ten days or so.”

“Sure, if Elisabeth was at peak form. But not now.”

Kaito gently shook his head. His expression was calm as he shared a piece of information that only he knew.

“Because Diablo has infiltrated her body, she can’t die. But while she still had her freedom, she expelled one of her internal organs. As a result, her body can’t

generate new mana anymore.”

Confused looks filled the room. Saying that Elisabeth had expelled one of her organs was a ridiculous claim. Hina alone squeezed the hem of her maid uniform. Everyone else turned toward Lute, wondering what organ Kaito was talking about.

Kaito gave his chest a quick thump.

Then he revealed the bizarre truth.

“Right now, Elisabeth’s heart is inside me.”



It took a good ten seconds for Lute to fully comprehend what Kaito had uttered.

So this is what he meant when he said he was “getting used to it” and would “get better at it soon.”

Blood carried great significance to dark mages. Their mana originated from their hearts, then traveled to the rest of their body through their blood. And due to the roots the demon meat had spread throughout Elisabeth’s organs, hers was a reactor with power beyond compare. And apparently, it was now in Kaito’s body. Lute was struck speechless. If that was the case...

In other words... Right now, Sir Kaito is...

...the Kaiser’s immortal contractor and the inheritor of the Torture Princess’s mana.

Few would be able to fully understand the overwhelming nature of that truth. However, the color drained from the faces of several of the mages present.

Caring little for whether or not his words caused shock or were even understood, Kaito went on.

“And because I inherited her heart, a new connection sprang up between Elisabeth and me. Diablo stole away her consciousness and is using her body to birth underlings—but all pain and injuries they’re causing are being delivered *straight to me.*”

“...What?”

Lute let out a dumbfounded yelp.

Kaito grinned. As he did, crimson blood dripped down from the corner of his lips.

“But it’s not like I can just go passing out now. I have it more or less under control, but it *hurts like a bitch*.”

Lute could imagine. Right now, the underlings were transforming the world into a living hell. Their acts of brutality spanned the entirety of civilization. If all the pain they were causing was being transferred to a single person...

There’s no way they could maintain their sanity! That’s madness! How can he withstand it?!

“I guess forcing me to get used to pain is the one thing I gotta thank my old man for, huh?”

A carefree smile spread across Kaito’s face. The expression hardly suited the moment, and the room’s occupants froze upon seeing it. Every second, pain was being sent to his body. And all of it was passing through the Kaiser and being converted into mana.

The silence was tinged with fear. Kaito himself shrugged, then gave his chin a light jerk.

“So? Carry on. If you don’t, the world’s gonna get destroyed. You do know that, right?”

“T-true, it will... No, it won’t! Our stance remains unchanged. Even if what you say is true, and the Saint did set down her burden, then the new Saint who bears God within her will carry out restructuring all the same! We have faith in that! We have to...we have to believe in that.”

“Very well, then. If humanity wishes to sacrifice themselves for their faith, then far be it from us to stop them.”

A husky, feral voice spoke up. The first imperial princess of the beastfolk licked her lips.

Sharp claws glittered atop her fingers as she tapped on the round table’s surface.

“Your proposal for a unified line of defense among the three races is hereby rejected. And while we’re at it, let’s annul the peace treaty, too. And while we focus our own defenses, we’ll move in on the human territories, too. We have a right to revenge, after all. And the Saint is already in our grasp. This way, we can mount a resistance against the pillars and wipe out humanity, just the way you want it.”

“Sister, you’re making a terrible decision! Declaring war at a time like this? You may excel at battle, sister, and even with the recent loss of your elite troops, your army is no doubt still strong. But do you truly believe that you can accomplish both those things without suffering crippling losses? Your ambitions will leave the forest barren. How can you not see that?”

“Be quiet, Vyade! Who do you think you’re taking that tone with?! We’ve remained silent for too long. Letting this opportunity pass us by would mar our pride as beastfolk!”

The first imperial princess’s indignation shut Vyade right up. Her approval among the people served as her sole weapon. The actual authority she wielded was comparatively slim. Now was not the time to descend into bickering.

The demi-human delegation looked at one another, then stood. The bespectacled, aged green lizard spoke solemnly.

“Very well. Humanity did bring this upon us. We will stand with our old friends and form a united front alongside them. If you all wish to resign yourselves to destruction, then your fate is in your own hands. But the disorder within your Church seems to run deep. I doubt you have the power to successfully protect your people. It appears that this is the end for you.”

The hostility of the other two races bore down upon the humans. It was true; the Church had been to blame for the current situation.

This could all be seen as a natural result of that. However, the humans lacked the resolution to admit fault and try to change the way things were going. La Christoph didn’t have that authority. Two of the advisers turned to the king and whispered.

“Your Majesty, now is the time to make your decision. Once the restructuring occurs, we will all be saved. But first, we must destroy the pagans. Perhaps we

should have done so sooner. We must begin the third king's holy war anew. You must demonstrate your faith in God, for the sake of the people."

"Please, Your Majesty, give the order to deploy all the saints."

"I... I..."

The king was clearly baffled. The decisions he was being asked to make were far beyond what he was mentally equipped to handle. He was young, and death and responsibility clearly scared him. The Church obviously wanted to get things under way before any of the influential aristocrats who'd missed the meeting could get a say. "All you have to do is nod," the king's advisers whispered enticingly.

While all of that was going on, Lute's gaze turned to a certain someone.

Kaito was calmly watching over the proceedings. His eyes were strangely serene, and they were picking up everything that was happening.

Kaito heaved a deep, deep sigh. Then, out of the blue, he snapped his fingers.

"*La* (become)."

When he did, over a hundred blades manifested in midair.

Azure flower petals and darkness had danced luxuriously through the air, and executioner's ax-shaped blades had lined up within them. Everyone present had steel pointed right at their neck. Anyone with any amount of combat experience couldn't help but immediately realize what was happening.

It was a dangerous stunt, one that would normally be carried out with hundreds of soldiers. As he stared in wonderment, a thought passed through Lute's head.

Normally, a coup isn't something one carries out on their own.

That was just common sense. Right now, though, that common sense had been overturned.

A voice rang through the hall, one tinged with disappointment.

"Enough of this nonsense—clearly you guys are all useless."

Kaito Sena slowly rose from his chair.

The hem of his black uniform flared out behind him as he began walking. The way his tunic was dyed scarlet on the inside really was reminiscent of the Torture Princess's dress. It was at that point that Lute realized something. Almost like proof of his explosive development as a mage, Kaito's beastly left arm had returned to that of a human. Kaito casually leaped atop the round table. Lute elected not to follow him. A beautiful automaton, on the other hand, unfalteringly took her place by Kaito's side.

"Oh? What's this? You've finally decided to seize your crown, O unworthy master of mine?"

Humanlike laughter accompanied the horrible black dog's appearance. Seemingly thinking that he might as well, Kaito snapped his fingers. Azure petals and darkness scattered throughout the room, and Vlad Le Fanu's phantasm made a graceful appearance from within them.

"Why, hello, hello. I see that my dear successor has assembled quite the notable audience."

Placing a hand atop his chest, Vlad gave an elegant, courteous bow to the members of the conference.

The three of them now in tow, Kaito stopped at the center of the table. Azure petals and black darkness swirled up once more. A jet-black long sword dropped from within them. The engraving carved upon its beautiful blade flashed.

When it did, its meaning was seared into the eyes of all present.

All things are pardoned unto me. But I am ruled by none.

Then the azure glow abruptly faded. Flower petals still fluttering through the air, Kaito lorded over his surroundings.

"All I wanna do is save the woman I admire. And I don't want to let any more innocent people become victims. That's all. I have no desire to dominate, no lust for glory. And I certainly don't intend on ruling or getting involved with politics at all. I don't give a shit about who's in charge after this. But right now? Right now, I'm taking charge of the world."

Kaito Sena, the Torture Princess's servant, lorded over the assembled nobles

of all races.

Blood dripped from his mouth. He lifted his sword, then pointed it at his newfound hostages.

“Humanity, beastfolk, and demi-humans are all equal. Every living creature is ignorant, every living creature is like a stupid animal, and every living creature is precious. So I’ll promise you this. I’m gonna keep you all alive. I’m gonna save the world. And that’s why...”



*

Then the boy who had once died meaninglessly in another world made his grand declaration.

“...Just for now, I’m king. So obey me.”

In that moment, as the world crumbled, the Mad King was born.

And as he was, the desperate battle to survive in the world of the two pillars began.

Afterword

Before I realized it, it was fall.

And this is the fifth volume. Hallelujah.

Thank you all so much for buying the fifth volume of *Torture Princess*. I feel like out of the whole series, this volume was the most harrowing for Kaito. How did you all enjoy it? As I was writing it, the thought *gosh, this is getting intense* crossed my mind a number of times, and during the editing process, I realized, *gosh, this really is intense*. All I did was follow my plot outline, so I wonder why that could have been. I'm planning on keeping the hits coming in Volume 6, so I hope you will all look forward to it.

By the way, this volume is scheduled for release at the same time as the first volume of Ms. Hina Yamato's manga adaptation of *Torture Princess*, which, as an author, is something I find extremely moving. If you purchase them together, you'll also get a side story I wrote with illustrations by Hina Yamato and Saki Ukai, so please go check it out. Both of them are brilliant artists, and their work is magnificent.

The manga version wouldn't have been possible without the love and care of Hina Yamato and everyone else involved in the adaptation put into it, but it also wouldn't have been possible without the support of all you readers, so I ask that you kindly continue enjoying both the manga version of *Torture Princess* and the original novels. As a side note, the official Twitter account (@goumonhime) is active, so if you'd like, please give it a follow. If you would be so kind.

Now, suddenly, we find ourselves in the acknowledgments section, so I'd like to thank Saki Ukai for the beautiful-as-always illustrations made for this volume; my editor O, who gave me all sorts of useful advice; Hina Yamato and everyone else involved in the wonderful manga adaptation; and my beloved family, particularly my older sister. Thank you all so very, very much. And above all

else, I would like to offer another round of thanks to my readers. Thank you all so much for reading my story up through its fifth volume. The only way I can think of to really repay you is to write the most interesting stories I possibly can, so I plan to keep working as hard as I can.

I pray we will meet again.

The Mad King has been born.

Will the world end, or will it not?

What will become of him and her?

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